

MAY 1996



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& Eric Brown**

plus stories by

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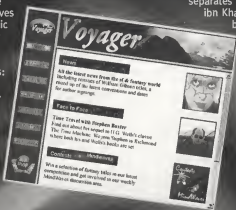
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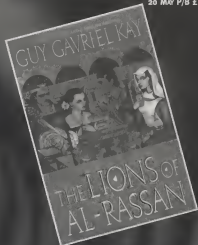
### 'CONGRATULATIONS STEPHEN'

Congratulations from all at Voyager to Stephen Baxter whose book *The Time Ships*, has been shortlisted for the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award. *The Time Ships* is the authorised sequel to HG Wells's classic *The Time Machine*. Stephen Baxter fans can catch an exclusive interview with the author on the new Voyager web site. And Stephen Baxter's latest masterpiece *Ring*, the finale to his Xeelee saga is now available in Voyager paperback.

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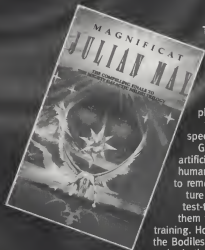
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# interZone

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science fiction & fantasy

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# Interaction



Dear Editors:

It occurs to me that the malaise afflicting sf at the moment is precisely the same as that afflicting publishing in general – and like so much else you can lay it squarely at the door of the Tories.

Long ago, in other days, when libraries were funded, the sole criterion for putting out a book was that a publisher wanted to publish it; half the first print-run would be snapped up by the libraries, and even if the book in question sold not one additional copy it would still break even.

Then came the clever bit. Borrowing figures were totted up and used to gauge the market for the second and larger imprint – with the result that publishers, on the whole, put out books which people actually wanted to buy and read.

Now that the libraries are underfunded – and what little funds they have are eaten up by installing Mickey Mouse computer systems on the backhanders rather than buying apparently incidental items like books – this whole level of filtering has gone, with the result that the decisions of production, the yea or the nay, now rest solely on the opinions of individual editors and the marketing people. And individual editors and marketing people, as we all know, couldn't find their collective arse with an atlas.

We all know the result: the billion-squillion advances to the Name Writers that couldn't be recouped if every

man, woman and child on Earth bought three copies each. The couple of hundred in used notes to established but not easily marketable talent like the late Brunner. The absolute lack of any market for first-time original fiction. That last's overstating a little, admittedly – but whereas publishing a first novel used to be damned hard but possible, now it's comparable to winning the Lottery.

(Incidentally and for no reason whatsoever: don't you get sick of the non-mathematicians saying things like winning the Lottery is about as likely as finding Elvis on the moon? If that were true then somebody'd find one Elvis on one moon every week. Unless it's a rollover.)

Anyhow. The only outlet for new writers, and those others who don't quite fit into the marketing mix, are in what we lightly dismiss as the "spinnoffery." Now, God knows, my own stuff in this field is no great shakes, but I'd stack it against anything from the crappier end of the books published as original sf as little as ten years ago – and I'd draw your attention to people like Paul Cornell and Andrew Cartmel, who are producing work every bit as good as the best. If not better.

You see, because Virgin, Bantam and the like know they have a solid market and they're guaranteed to sell something like 50,000 copies come what may, they can take a few risks on new writers and ideas – rather than just churning out yet another heap of high-concept, template pap that the bastards with the flow-charts or the reviewers who are just too precious for words like. There's no paradox here: the initial, basic and integral marketability of the *Star Trek* universe, say, frees you up to put your effort into saying something new when you write about it.

We're not talking about film-script novelizations, of course; we're talking about the original fiction that just happens to use licensed characters and scenarios – and I submit that this is where the most vital and alive work is now being produced. The so-called

"spinnoffery" is comparable to what used to be the mid-list, at the very least. It's where the real work is being done, and it's about time it got the recognition and respect it deserves.

But if that's unbelievable, if you're that much of a snob, then how can a publisher revitalize his or her list without having to get involved with those nasty spinnoffery hacks? Simple. Sell your books to the libraries at a whopping discount – damn well *give* 'em away for that matter. The initial outlay isn't all that great, and come a year from now you'll have invaluable market research to dictate what you reprint and sell to actual punters.

Fire the marketing department and use the money to set up a loss-leader fund, the only purpose of which is that it must put out a minimum number of books by new writers a year – even if you're not happy with some of them for their apparent unmarketability. Put them through the library system and you'll get a surprise. Competition between writers being what it is, people will be fighting to get into this stable and consistent toe-in-the-door, and would probably go through hoops even on a basic royalty deal. The only thing I've ever agreed on with Robert A. Fawcett is that when an editor pisses on something he likes the flavour better. If the Ur-systemer will put up with it.

Off the top of my head, I suspect a system like this would take two or three years to get rolling – and then, my God, how the money would roll in. Isn't there one publisher out there willing to take the gamble and, incidentally, help save a library system that's uttering its last gasp?

Thought not.

**Dave Stone**  
London

*Editor: There has always been "pulp" fiction – at any rate, since the rise of a semi-literate city-dwelling proletariat and the invention of cheap printing techniques in the 1820s and 1830s – and it has always been sneered at, even if in later times some of it has gained nostalgic appeal and occa-*

*sional "classic" status. The great tradition of pulp runs from the French romans feuilletons through the American story papers and British part-works, the US dime novels and weekly "libraries," through the early 20th-century pulp magazines themselves (and their nearest UK equivalents, the juvenile story papers produced in vast quantities by the Amalgamated Press and D. C. Thomson), to the paperback-original novels of the 1950s and 1960s (Gold Medal and Ace in the USA, the British "mushroom publishers" and so on). Media "spinnoffery" is the pulp fiction of today: no doubt collectors in the future will prize Virgin Books' "New Doctor Who" and "Judge Dredd" novels (many of them written by Dave Stone) just as much as present-day enthusiasts value old issues of Doc Savage and Captain Future, or Union Jack and The Modern Boy... As for Dave Stone's library suggestion, would any publishers or librarians out there care to comment?*

Dear Editors:

Back in IZ 97 you published my letter explaining how difficult it was to find *Interzone* and my complaints about the lack any similar publications on the newsstands. Well, soon after you published my letter things began to happen: one day I popped into my newsagent and found *Beyond* and then two American magazines, *Science Fiction Age* and *Realms of Fantasy*. From zero to three in less than a month! Being a genius, I realized this was down to morphic fields. No doubt created by *Interzone* readers moved to tears by my sad plight. So – as we have this power we might as well use it!

This is my cunning plan to get you out of the "temporary slump" in sales you mention in IZ 97. This is what you do: First speak to one of those nice magazine distributors and get *Interzone* distributed across the country and then the world. Meanwhile all we readers are thinking positive

thoughts to aid your success. The magazine will begin to sell in huge numbers and before you know it you are making millions from TV shows, merchandising deals, etc. You know, things like life-size dolls of David Langford, Langford wigs, no tat, tasteful stuff. The more readers the more we can effect the fields and so the more will read *IZ*; a runaway chain reaction will start and soon millions, then billions, of pounds will be pouring into your hands.

Your next move is simple. You now have the funds to buy out Rupert Murdoch (yes, you Pringle are the new Murdoch) and so into your sweaty hands fall all those newspapers and satellite channels. More consumers for this magazine, and soon billions and billions of them will think nice things about you: in no time you are voted world president, peace and prosperity ensue and then we can start building the first of the great starships, and before you know it the universe is ours, entropy is stopped, immortality guaranteed. And what do I get out of it, I hear cynical voices cry? Well, all I want is a couple of galaxies – nothing flash, just a half a billion stars each.

Now, some of you might have one or two doubts about this foolproof plan, so to appease these doubters I suggest you make a few changes to your cover as a back-up. All you have to do is put a picture of "Scully" from *The X-Files* on the cover, and to be on the safe side Princess Di and Captain Jean-Luc Picard from the *Enterprise* (he could wear a Langford wig), and just to make sure – and this is the master stroke – they'd all be naked! I'd buy it.

But still there will be foolish doubters; so as my final master stroke I suggest something extra. Some time ago I heard about a German Lesbian magazine that smeared blood on its cover "to symbolize male brutality," etc. Now I don't suggest this, as I imagine you are a little pale at the moment, but what about some other organic substance stuck on the cover? Perhaps some Pringle toe-

nails or a small vial of Chris Gilmore's venom (useful against all those superbugs that are taking over the world)?

But enough of such fancies, my real concern is simple. Why are you not distributed through retail outlets? Is it because you might print and lose money? Is the market so small? I'm sure I heard a media pundit say that magazines grow new markets, unlike newspapers. It is worth the risk! What annoys me is that I can buy American publications but not British; even poor old *Beyond* soon vanished from my local newswagents after a few issues (as David Langford reported in *IZ* 103, they are having problems; perhaps the format is wrong).

What about going to paperback? I know it has been done before, and as far as I know failed. I would do it differently, let's be radical: for a start, I'd sell it priced 99p. What about economics? I can hear authors choking on their coffee now. My plan is simple: they get a fee depending on how many copies are sold – bad sales, bad pay. And print it in Eastern Europe. And 99p paperbacks do sell in vast numbers. For example, in my local remainder bookshop I saw piles of *Other Edens* vanish in no time as well as *New Worlds 4* at the above price, even though both are short-story collections and they "don't sell." *New Worlds* was axed because of this very reason, but it sells at 99p.

Lastly, let's not be po-faced about the cover or even the leading story; if the cover has to have a Tardis or Kirk on it, so be it; this also applies to stories about *Star Trek*, *Deep Space Nine*, etc. The vast bulk of the book would be new work, the whole point is to introduce people to all these great new writers. For God's sake the *Doctor Who* magazine sells over 100,000 copies an issue: place Tom Baker on the front cover and, who knows, 90,000 new readers. I simply want more people to read this great magazine. **Francis O'Reagan**  
*Didcot, Oxon.*

**Editor:** Your concerns are

*appreciated. Interzone does in fact have newstrade distribution, via W. H. Smith and John Menzies (and via Gordon & Gotch in Australia and New Zealand); however, most newswagents take extremely few copies, and to be sure of getting the magazine readers have to order it specifically. As to your last suggestion, spinoff fiction might form the basis of a popular sf magazine aimed at younger readers, but there would be the ticklish problem of obtaining rights. If a magazine were to publish, say, Doctor Who and Star Trek stories it would have to get permission from the BBC and Paramount Pictures, and those organizations would no doubt want their cut...*

**Dear Editors:**

I just had to write in praise of Mary A. Turzillo's "Eat or Be Eaten: A Love Story" in this month's *IZ* (number 104).

I live in a hundred-year-old block of flats just off the Edgware Road. One Friday night those of us (many) residents without gas fires

were forced to turn to our electric heaters to stave off the bitter cold. Unfortunately the building's wiring couldn't cope with the demand and at around 9.30 pm there was a fire in the fuse box. Cue copious amounts of smoke and beefy fire-fighters wheezing up the stairwells in full breathing kit.

The upshot of all this was that we were without electricity for the rest of night. And since I was neither inclined to spend the night at a friend's (and leave my worldies at the mercy of some opportunistic thief) nor to go to bed because of the risk of secondary fires, I lit all four of my remaining candles, wrapped myself up in some blankets on the couch and picked up this month's *IZ*.

The unusual circumstances turned it into the perfect reading experience, stripped of any and all distractions. And it was Mary A. Turzillo's story, more than anything else, that made it so pleasurable.

Thank you.  
**Jamie Barras**  
*London*

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Shuttle lurched. "Primary shipboard systems failure."

Wake stared through the monitor as lightning leapt between fat cotton-wool clouds. She was deep inside this remote gravity well, *inside* a storm, and fast falling further in.

"Switch to secondary, Shuttle. Affirm."

Shuttle bucked through turbulent air.

"I said, 'Affirm.'"

"Crew loss scenario."

She felt sweat prickle her skin beneath her flight suit. "Detail."

"Ninety per cent likelihood of secondary shipboard systems failure."

Shit. That was non-survivable, all right, according to the book.

"Switch to manual. Tell Mother I'm aborting the landing and coming home."

"Boosters inoperable. No pressure in propellant tank. Crew loss —"

"— scenario. Right," she muttered. *Now what?*

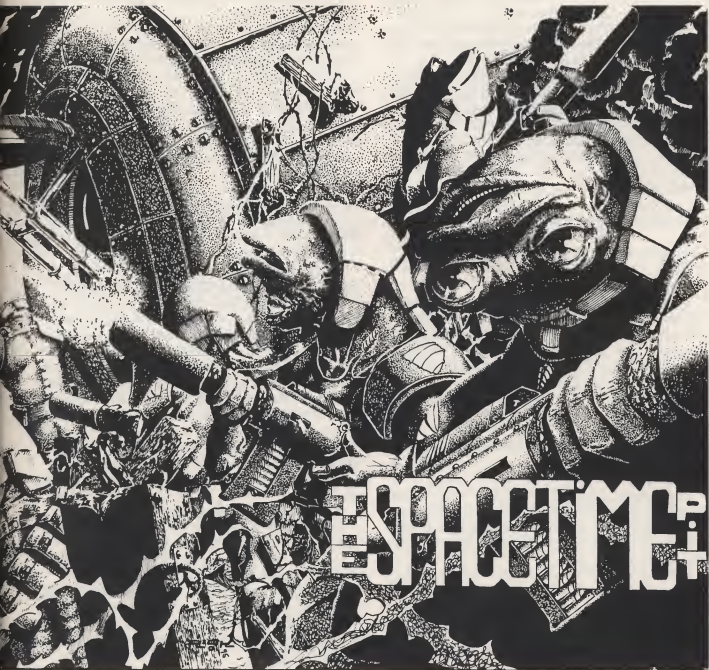
Shuttle was old, but it wasn't supposed to fail. It was loaded up with redundant systems to keep it functioning, if minimally, for years.

In the end, though, everything failed. If it hadn't been this storm, the lightning strikes Shuttle had taken, it would have been some other damn thing, on some other remote world.

Wake was on her own, out here at the rim of human expansion. Her training had hammered home that, in the end, she couldn't rely on the equipment. It was up to her to keep herself alive. *If A fails, try B! If B fails, try C!*

If she couldn't get back to orbit, she'd land. She would need raw materials, for repairs, fuel. She couldn't see the surface, had no real idea what kind of conditions she was dropping into here. She'd have to deal with that later.

Lightning leapt before Shuttle, flashing in Wake's face, dazzling her. Shuttle took a sickening dive to



Illustrations by Rick Dawson

starboard.

"Give me the coordinates of the Alpha One landmass."

"Affirm."

The grey, ragged clouds parted, revealing an ocean of beaten grey steel. On the horizon sat an island, mountainous, irregular. She was skimming just a couple of hundred metres above peaking waves.

*Christ. And it's only an hour since I was in the sauna on Mother.*

"Secondary systems shutdown imminent."

"Advise emergency procedure."

"Crew loss scenario."

"Oh, for God's sake —"

Shuttle was now, frankly, falling out of the sky. *One option left.* She got out of her seat and staggered towards Pod. Shuttle's floor tipped under her in a compound, violent motion; she lurched, clattering against consoles and equipment boxes.

She reached the long, hexagonal coffin and slid

inside. Cold subdermals snaked over her skin.

"Instructions," Pod said.

"Use your heuristic algorithms. Assess the situation. Ensure minimal danger. Prepare damage reports, locality surveys, survival scenarios..."

"Affirm."

The lid closed over her. She closed her hands over the locket at her neck and thought of Ben.

She felt a kick in the back as Pod threw itself out of Shuttle.



She'd orbited the fifth planet of this dim star, a hundred light years from Earth, for two days, before deciding to come in for a closer look. It appeared vaguely Earthlike: thick cloud cover over transparent oxygen-nitrogen air, oceans of water. The only landmass of any significance was the largest island of an archipelago straddling the equator. There were traces of green on the island, but her sensors didn't betray any hint of chlorophyll. She couldn't see any sign of

Eetee organisation – no industrial smog, no large structures, no radio or other signals.

She was pretty sure the planet wouldn't be directly habitable, and there would be no Contact here. But maybe it could be terraformed.

Wake was paid by a complicated system to do with the number of useful worlds she turned up in each survey sweep, and how useful each world was. *Possibly terraformable* was pretty low down the list of desirables and wouldn't pay her much.

Maybe just enough to justify a landing, she'd decided at last.

The day after this landing, she'd been due to ship out and head home. In fact she was only three days from Earth, using Mother's Alcubierre FTL drive.



She surfaced through a sea of anaesthetics.

"Status report."

"Crew survival not assured."

*Terrific.* She struggled to sit up. Pod was tilted, so her head was maybe 20 degrees below her feet, and the crystal canopy was obscured by something – the drapes of the parachute, she realized belatedly. Through the uncovered half of the canopy she made out a blindingly green-blue sky.

*Green?* Of course. From the scattering of the orange light of this G8-class sun –

"Where's Mother?"

"Orbital elements are one hundred twenty-three point four by –"

"Show me."

Fine reticles appeared in the glass of the canopy. Guided by them she picked out a silver point steady in the south-west sky, brilliant despite the daylight: Mother, in its stationary orbit, over this landmass. She felt a surge of relief.

Pod's report said the air outside was close enough to Earth's to sustain her for a few hours, but there were some mild toxins. She could spend no more than a couple of hours at a time out of Pod. She couldn't move far, then.

Temperature 30 Celsius. *A bright summer's day on Alpha One.*

Right now Mother would be sending out "Crew Loss" buoys. If Wake could get to Shuttle she could instruct Mother to start emitting mayday FTL buoys, telling the Universe she was still alive. There was no guarantee anyone would respond, but it was a better chance than nothing.

And if she did get to Shuttle, of course, she might do better than that; maybe she could figure out a way to get back to orbit, to Mother.

She pushed at the canopy; it opened with a sigh of hydraulics, shrugging off the parachute.

Pod had come down in the foothills of an eroded mountain range. She stood on a grass-covered plateau. *Well, it looks like grass.* Beyond the lip of the plateau a green valley fell away, widening towards a ribbon of ocean to the south. A quicksilver thread of river twisted across the valley bottom. *U-shaped valley. Glaciated, probably.* There were plants, something like trees: short, thick-boled, with a haze of crimson leaves. The sun sat on the horizon, huge, too orange.

The panorama was sufficiently *different* to send a shiver down her spine.

She touched the locket around her neck. From within the heart-shaped crystal Ben smiled. Ben's two girls – Wake's granddaughters, microgravity-slender – held onto his arm and waved. The hologram had been taken in the Shelter, the big, bright, grass-walled chamber at the heart of the L5 colony, the place children were brought up. The Earth colours, the chlorophyll green of the grass and trees, were strikingly different from Alpha One. As if this planet was a poor mock-up.

She kneeled down and picked a few blades of the "grass". It was more like a six-fold clover leaf. And the green tint was like copper oxide, not chlorophyll-bright.

"Pod. Tell me about the biota."

"Most numerous atoms are silicon, hydrogen, oxygen. Silicon bonds form the basic architecture of –"

She stopped listening. *Oh, great. I've discovered silicon-based life.* That was supposed to be impossible. Silicon couldn't form double bonds like carbon; silicon couldn't form the metastable compounds which encouraged the development of large, complex molecules... Evidently, nature here had found a way.

It didn't matter a damn to her. Basic science was part of her contract, but it paid hardly anything. What was most significant was the fact that not even Pod's smart digestive sacs would be able to turn these silicon-based raw materials into food for her.

She interrupted Pod's lecture. "Tell me about supplies."

"Five days at nominal intake."

Five days of gloop fed to her intravenously by the sub-dermals. *I need to find that damn Shuttle.*

Pod gave her a bearing for Shuttle's crash site. It was a kilometre to the south, down the valley.

She walked over soft, grass-carpeted ground, plucking diamond-shaped leaves from the trees. The green wasn't quite right, and neither was the sky, but it was almost impossible to believe that there was nothing here she could eat.

The crash site was a scar in the hillside, all but grown over. She found what might have been the comms deck; its case was corroded and broken open, and a kind of lichen spilled out when she tried to lift it.

She went back to Pod. "How long have I been down here?"

"Two local years." Which was about one Earth year.

"A year? Why so long?"

"Pod seeking crew survival assurance. Not attainable. Opened at limit of heuristic algorithms for further direction."

She squatted down on the grass and hugged her knees. She hadn't anticipated such a gap. She hadn't even thought to ask Pod how long she'd been inert. *Too damn long;* so long she'd already lost Shuttle, in the accelerated entropy of this spacetime pit.

She figured options.

She could try to signal. But, hell, she didn't have enough power to send anything that would be picked up at interstellar distances. And besides, it would

take decades for a lightspeed signal to reach anywhere inhabited.

She could try to build a Shuttle, get back to orbit. Yeah. But she knew Pod didn't have the resources to enable her to turn unmined iron ore into a spacegoing craft. And besides, she was no engineer.

She was trapped here, in this gravity pit, alone, out of touch, and everybody who knew her must have been told she was dead.

She let go, just for a second.

Then she straightened up. *To hell with that.* She needed some options.

...At the foot of the valley, two or three kilometres away, a thin thread of smoke rose into the air.



She hurried back to Pod. She slipped a vocoder headset over her head, fixing the microphone before her mouth, and then she fastened a laser pistol to her belt.

The sun had climbed from the horizon. *It's local morning, then.* Another thing she hadn't thought to inquire of Pod. *I have to get more observant, less self-obsessed, if I'm to live through this.* She walked down the steep hillside into the valley.

There were fields in the valley bottom. They were delimited by low walls of boulders, glacial deposit hauled away from the soil. She made out more threads of smoke, a collection of tiny, mud-coloured huts. *Eetees.*

She passed small brown quadrupeds: ruminants browsing on the grass-analogue. Silicon-based birds pulsed through the air around her, their chirps high and piercing. The whole place was just a feast of convergent evolution, she thought.

After a kilometre she found a path worn into the hillside. She followed the twisting, copper-coloured track to the valley bottom.

The first dwelling she came to, a timber and adobe shack on stilts, was on the other side of a field planted with orderly rows of what looked like beet. There were crude ploughs, made of some wood-analogue, standing around in the field. *Not technologically advanced, then.* This could be the sticks, of course. She needed to find a city, industrial advancement.

She was forming a tentative plan. It would take the resources of a partially industrialized society, at least, to project her back to orbit. Maybe these Eetees had space technology. If so, she had to find it.

It wasn't a good plan, but it was all she had.



There was movement in the field before her.

The Eetee was kneeling beside a row of the beet stuff, facing away from her. It straightened, and stared up into the empty sky.

*Amphibian descent,* she thought immediately: specifically, a frog. A silicon-based frog. The thing was bilaterally symmetric: two arms, two legs. Its portly torso stood on spindly legs; its skin colour was a lustrous brown, almost as if lacquered. It wore a length of dun cloth over its loins area. Modesty? A tool belt?

The Eetee turned around. Its domed head was even more frog-like: two bulbous eyes, a wide slit of a mouth – but the eyes were sheltered *under* the mouth. It looked as if its head was upside down. Its

naked chest was patterned with three mustard-yellow chevrons.

When its gaze met Wake's, it froze, staring at her.

Slowly she raised her hand in salute. Any tool-making biped ought to respond to the gesture. Wake crossed the field, between the rows of leafy plants. Two metres from the Eetee she started to speak, making random greetings.

The Eetee was small, barely reaching her midriff. Its yellow eyes triangulated on her face. The Eetee issued a series of sibilant bumbles. After a couple of minutes the vocoder blipped.

"...my field? What do you want? Have you come to damage the crops? What..."

"I am a traveller. My name is Katerina Wake." She pointed to herself. "And you?"

The Eetee peered up from under its mouth, listening to words that weren't synchronized with her oddly-placed lips. "I am a planter and grower of crops. I am –" A gurgle. The vocoder projected a transliteration onto her eyeball. "F'han Lha."

"What do you call your people?"

It just looked back at her.

That was a bad sign. A lack of a name to distinguish the locals meant the Eetee didn't know of anyone beyond its immediate group. Even in theory. And if this Eetee thought that this squalid little community contained the only people in the world, there couldn't be much in the way of travel, trade, communication.

Not likely to be any spaceships, either. *I've landed in a silicon-based Middle Ages.*

F'han's gaze dropped from Wake's face and regarded the locket at her neck. She pulled the locket over her head and held it before the Eetee's fascinated eyes, let the hologram cycle.

F'han reached out with three-fingered hands. No opposable thumb, she noticed.

"For me?"

"No. I'm sorry." She slipped the locket back over her neck.

Three more Eetees came clambering down a ladder in the underside of the stilted hut. They loped towards her, their gait low and regular. "F'han!"

F'han ran through the field towards the others. The newcomers must have been as tall as Wake; one of them clutched F'han's head protectively. *I've been talking to a child.*

Quickly, the four Eetees climbed the rickety wood-analogue ladder and disappeared into the dark underside of the dwelling.



She walked back up the valley wall to Pod.

She could stretch Pod's supplies to ten or 15 days by going to half-rations. And she could always spin out her time on the surface by going back into stasis, inside Pod. Pod was self-maintaining. She could last down here for months, years, if she had to, living a few hours at a time... *But for what?* So she could starve next year instead of this?

Of course F'han was only a kid. It wouldn't know everything. Maybe there was a glittering city just beyond the hills... But she would have seen it from

orbit. *Face it, Wake. This is all there is. Silicon-based subsistence farmers: nothing more or less.*

These Eetees had to be generations away from developing a technology sufficient to help her: to sustain her complex biochemical needs, to lift her back to orbit.

*If A fails, try B! If B fails, try C!...*

Well, if the Eetees couldn't help her *now*, she'd just have to wait until they could. She'd climb into Pod and wait it out as long as was necessary for these Eetees to scratch their way to some kind of technology; she could hold out a hell of a long time, in Pod.

Into the face of the rock behind Pod she lasered a low crevice, and then, over the next hour, she pushed Pod into the narrow overhang. She banked up earth and rock against the length of Pod; now it would be protected from the weather, and, when the grass-analogue grew on the earthworks, hidden from easy observation.

She climbed into Pod.

"Instructions?"

*How long?* She needed to wait out enough time to see if the Eetees were on an upwards technological curve, or not. But not so long she stranded herself out of time.

*Fifty years?*

In 50 years, Ben would probably be dead. And the girls would be middle-aged women – as old as Wake was now. She found it hard to accept that in subjective seconds the people she loved most would have lived their lives without her.

But she didn't have a lot of choice, she thought bleakly.

"Fifty years. Earth standard."

She closed her eyes, and submitted to the embrace of the subdermals.

∞ ∞ ∞

She awoke, and lay there waiting for the lid to open.

She felt no different, as if she'd barely closed her eyes. And the sky, through the canopy, looked unchanged. To the south west she could see Mother, a spark of light unmoving in the green-blue sky.

She put on the vocoder and made her way down the valley. She took a footpath across a fallow field towards the farm where, 50 years ago, she'd spoken with F'han Lha.

A group of Eetees laboured in their stony fields. The spindly-limbed frog people had their wood-analogue ploughs shackled to their backs, and they scraped furrows through the crimson earth. The workers looked up, observed her progress for a few seconds, then returned incuriously to their toil.

More labourers were standing in line by the silver river. As Wake watched, they passed containers fashioned from gourds along the line. The last workers tipped the water onto the earth. It was laborious, fantastically inefficient.

She could see no signs of change.

She felt a sharp contempt for the Eetees. For how many centuries had they lived like this, enduring their bucolic existence of birth, work in the fields, death?

The orange sun beat down on her head; she was hot, ragged, hungry, alone. *So much for my plan.* Well,

then, she thought with a trace of angry desperation, she would just have to tip the damn Eetees out of their dull, comfortable equilibrium.

She went to stand in the shade of the stilted farmhouse, and waited.

What she was planning wasn't exactly ethical. But ethics, for a humankind spreading desperately across new planets, were a luxury.

Ethical behaviour wasn't even in her training.

∞ ∞ ∞

When the sun got to its highest point, the workers trudged from the fields and the river. They shaded themselves under the farmhouse, and pushed mashed beet into the mouths on the tops of their skulls.

Wake stood before them. As the Eetees ate, they watched her blankly. "Where I come from we do things differently. Better. Easier." She picked up a sharp rock and began to scratch a crude diagram into the wood-analogue panels of the farmhouse. It was a tube curled into a spiral, around a central cylinder. If the diagram didn't work she'd make a couple of simple models.

One of the Eetees came closer, apparently curious, a tall, wispy individual with a ring of green spots on its carapace.

"We draw water with this. It is easier. This device is called an Archimedes screw..."

∞ ∞ ∞

"Instructions."

She kissed the locket. "I'm sorry, Ben."

She was sliding deeper into this pit in space and time. But what choice was there? *I'm falling in, because there's nothing I can hold onto...*

*This is one hell of a plan, Wake.*

"Instructions," Pod repeated.

She closed her eyes. "Two hundred years. Earth standard." Maybe that would be long enough for the seed she'd planted to bear fruit.

*If A fails, try B! If B fails, try C!...*

∞ ∞ ∞

She opened her eyes. Above her, the crystal cover was cracked.

She pushed open the canopy and climbed out. She was stiff, her limbs sore, her stomach constricted. It was night; the clouds above her head were thick, rain-laden, and a sulphur-yellow glow illuminated their undersides.

Change, she thought immediately, and she exulted.

Her earthwork was gone, and Pod had been dragged out of its crevice and set on an apron of stone cobbles, surrounded by tall iron railings. Along Pod's silver flank there were scrapes and dents; it looked as if someone had tried to prise open the canopy.

Her heart beat faster. *I've induced curiosity, then.*

She crossed the cobbles, gripped the railings and peered through. She was still in the foothills – the worn mountains loomed behind her, dark, deserted – and to the south the valley, faintly outlined, fell away beyond this little compound. But now artificial lights glowed across the valley, in tight yellow splashes. She saw that roadways criss-crossed what had been a wide green plain. Stone dwellings filled the valley bottom, clustered about dark, oppressive buildings: mills,

factories perhaps. The river had been straightened out, dammed; huge spiral devices that she recognized as remote descendants of her Archimedes screw lined the engineered valley, pumping water into rectilinear irrigation ditches. At the mouth of the valley, remote, she saw the lights of a town, densely-packed streets, smog-laden air.

Through the hazy air she could just see a crude harbour at the edge of the ocean beyond.

She gazed into the south-west sky, looking for Mother. But the clouds were thick, and a haze of smog hung over the valley.

"... Halt! Do not move."

The command, with Eetee sibilants overlaid by her vocoder's whisper, came from behind her. She raised her hands in the air, showing them empty.

"Turn. Slowly."

Again, she obeyed.

Two solid-looking Eetees, garbed in black, tight uniforms, stood outside the Pod compound. They were covering her with what looked like crossbows. She could see the bolts; they were sharp, massive and grooved with a spiral rifling. Evidently, she thought wryly, her Archimedes-screw revolution had had a few unexpected spin-offs.

One of the Eetees opened a heavy gate and entered the compound. It raised its inverted head and glared at her with golden eyes. Then it crossed to Pod, and peered through the closed crystal canopy. It hissed something at its companion, too fast for the vocoder, then left the compound and started working at a squat machine at the brow of the valley. She heard the crackle of electricity. From the machine, sulphurous light glared out over the valley, in a dot-dash sequence. *A signal. They've been watching, waiting for me to emerge. And now that I have, they're signalling.*

After that, they waited. The Eetees wouldn't let her return to Pod, so she sat down on the cobbles, miming weariness.



After half an hour a growling rumble came up out of the valley. She stood, and the Eetees let her come to the railings.

A squat steam-truck was climbing the wall of the valley. Two Eetees in glittering ponchos sat on its roof, grandly, before a pair of funnels which spouted steam. The wheels were big, wood-spoked, iron-rimmed. Whatever boiler was hidden inside the boxy frame of the vehicle wasn't strong enough to haul the truck up the hill, and there was a crude harness arrangement in front of the truck. A dozen or more Eetees were strapped into the harness, dragging at the truck as it bumped over the uneven ground. A serf looked up at her vaguely, its mouth gaping open. It had a mustard yellow chevron on its bare chest, and – she was astonished to see – a crude locket, carved from wood, around its neck. The locket was obviously a clumsy imitation of her own. Perhaps, then, the serf was a descendant of F'han Lha; could the memory of her last brief emergence have been passed down the generations?

The two Eetees on top looked fat, sleek and well-dressed. The harnessed serfs, by comparison,



appeared scrawny, exhausted, bruised.

*You've become a serpent in paradise, Wake, she thought.*

The truck pulled up in front of the railings.

Two serfs helped one of the riding Eetees down to the ground. It approached Wake, waddling imperiously. Its poncho glowed crimson with copper inlays. She saw that its upper carapace had a marking, a circle of green dots, and it wore a pendant of its own, in the shape of an Archimedes spiral.

She felt overwhelmed. These people must have been ready for stimulation. Receptive. They'd taken the fragments she'd given them and built whole subcultures; she felt as if aspects of her personality were being reflected back at her, extrapolated to absurd lengths.

She held her hands out, palm up, questioning. "What do you want?"

The Eetee pointed to her vocoder, her clothes, Pod. It said something; it was a crude attempt to pronounce "Archimedes."

She was starting to feel breathless; already she needed to get back to Pod. Damn it. There just wasn't time to think any of this through.

These people did not appear motivated to help her. They just wanted what she had. She had to find out if they were a positive threat.

She pointed at Pod. "Mine," she said bluntly. "Not yours."

The serfs, still strapped into their brutal harnesses, stirred at this. She was hardly an expert at Eetee body language, but it seemed to her they were finding some kind of inspiration in her words of defiance. *Interesting.* Maybe there was an angle there she could exploit.

Green-Ring gestured. A soldier type raised its spiral crossbow and aimed at her head.

Wake's heart hammered, and she felt saliva pool at the back of her throat. *So. A threat, indeed. What now, Wake?*

She had to adjust their attitude. *Make them focus on a goal we can all share.*

She said, "Key. For Pod - for my tomb." She held her hands up, and started to lower them slowly towards her belt, to the laser pistol there.

Green-Ring seemed to be hesitating. She could see the soldiers' triple fingers tightening around their crossbow triggers.

She got the pistol out. She held it up for them to see, gambling they wouldn't recognize it as a weapon. "Key. Okay?"

She turned, holding the pistol up above her head, and started to walk back to Pod.

Then, with one movement, she turned and thumbed the laser's power switch. A wand of red light, intense in the smoggy gloom, arced over her head, supernaturally straight. Before the Eetees could move she brought the beam slicing down over a soldier, neatly lopping away an arm. Its crossbow clattered to the ground.

The soldier stared down at the stump, which was pumping out some dark blood-analogue. Then it fell backwards, its eyes rolling up, its remaining limbs in

spasm.

She advanced on the Eetees. She held up the locket and let the hologram cycle, glittering Earth green and blue. "Hear me! I will return in -" she calculated quickly "- one hundred years. Then, I will give you, your children, this light, the contents of my tomb. But in return..." She stabbed the wand of light at the clouds. "In return, you will build a machine to lift me into the sky. Take me to the light which orbits." The vocoder couldn't translate that. "The star which shines, steady in the sky." Enough. They had generations to figure it out. "Do it, or I will call down more light from the sky, and destroy your fields and factories, and turn the rivers and seas to steam, and cut your children to small pieces..."

The serfs - the descendants of the peasant-boy F'than, maybe - were shouting at her now, waving their arms in the air, holding up their crudely carved copies of her locket. *Good grief, she thought. They think I'm a god.* She hadn't anticipated that. Would it help, or harm her?

This culture, this valley world, was like a tub of paraffin into which, periodically, she was throwing lighted matches. She couldn't predict how this was going to turn out, if this latest absurd gamble would pay off.

It was too late to do anything about it.

She turned her back and walked to Pod, stiffly, expecting a crossbow bolt between her shoulder blades at each step.

She accepted the embrace of the sub-dermal with relief.



Pod shook; muffled booms reached her cocooned cabin.

Beyond the canopy's starred glass there was a flare of light. Lightning? No, it burned orange red.

Like aircraft fuel.

She pushed open the canopy and sat up; she felt old, stiff, beaten up.

The sky was huge, aquamarine, clear again. She located Mother, a spark of light in its south-west station, sailing serene above it all. But the sky was marred by contrails, white puffs of explosions, remote bangs.

The ancient hills still rose behind her, but something about them was different: in several places their profile had been altered, notched. In one place she saw the distant glint of glass, of fused rock.

She walked to the lip of the valley. The cobbled pavement was cratered rubble, the railings a tangle of rusting iron. There was an extensive barricade around Pod's enclosure now: earthworks, and what looked like tank traps. The earthworks extended down into the valley bottom: miles of them, bristling with gun emplacements and something like barbed wire.

Bedraggled Eetee soldiers moved through the mud. She saw several injured: stumps of amputated limbs, crudely bandaged carapaces. Many of the wounds looked infected. Evidently medical science hadn't advanced as much as the art of war.

Beyond the earthworks the valley was desolated,

the ground smashed, the small trees reduced to burned stumps. The port town she remembered in the distance had been flattened, reduced to a rectilinear grid of foundations. Fires burned, unattended, and she thought she could see ragged Eetees picking their way through rubble. The smog was gone, though. This war must have dragged on for years; there could have been no industry in this valley for a long time. Now, she could easily see all the way to the coast...

And there she made out a row of gantries, stark and grey, and at each there was a slender spire, glowing pearl white in the sun, wreathed with vapour.

Her breath caught. *More convergent evolution.* It might have been Canaveral or Tyuratam, Mergui or Tanega Shima: any of Earth's spaceports. *It worked, by God.* They are preparing to lift me to orbit.

A few hundred yards below her, a soldier in the earthworks spotted her. It started jabbering to its companions. More of them poked their carapaced heads above the trenches, and shouted. Then they began to clamber out, some of them awkward on injured limbs, and came towards her. Most of them were wearing amulets around their necks, and they held them up, aping the gesture she'd made yesterday... or 50 years before.

They began to chant, and the vocoder whispered. *I will call down light from the sky. I will destroy your fields and factories, and turn the rivers and seas to steam, and cut your children to small pieces...* They were gathering into a mob, and climbing the slope towards her.

She backed off, making sure she had a way back to Pod. So her scheme had worked. It was obvious these people worshipped her, to some degree; in fact they were defending Pod's site. (*From who?*) Maybe these were the descendants of the oppressed serfs she'd seen last time. Maybe, inspired by her memory, they'd thrown off their masters.

And this was their millennium: the second coming she had predicted, and was now fulfilling.

Right now, she was scared of being worshipped to death. And for all their fervour these people weren't much use to her anyhow. She had to get to that coastal launch complex...



The ground shuddered. Cobbles exploded into the air. She threw herself to the ground and covered her head with her arms; the Eetee troops fell back, screaming.

What now? Artillery? But she'd seen no flash, or smoke, and surely she would have heard any incoming projectile. A quake, then?

The shuddering went on and on. Smashed paving hailed down around her.

The ground broke open, not ten feet away. A metal snout shoved upwards, out of the earth, gleaming silver, spinning with a whine of worn bearings. The craft hauled its way out of its pit, laboriously, and tipped forward onto the surface. It was a fat cylinder with a spiral screw blade wrapped around its hull, like an Archimedes screw writ large and lethal. The blade stopped turning, and round hatches in the flanks of the craft tipped outwards. Troops spilled out of the steaming metal hull, shouting, bearing heavy rifles;

they wore copper-coloured ponchos strapped tightly to their bodies, laden with ammunition and other equipment.

*So the oppressing class is still around.* In fact it made sense; it must be the "oppressors," more technically advanced than the soldiers in the trenches, who had developed that launch complex.

She got to her feet. The siege-busting Eetees spotted her immediately; they pointed and shouted.

Her mind whirled. Should she throw in her lot with these poncho types, let them take her to the launch complex on the coast?

But they didn't look all that friendly. She remembered the naked greed of Green-Ring. These people evidently didn't venerate her; they just wanted what she had. And, despite the existence of that launch complex, they might be prepared to rob her without fulfilling their half of their bargain. At least the serfs were trying to protect her.

*What do I do? Which side do I pick?*



There was a growl from the trenches beyond the lip of the plateau. The ponchos turned, raising their weapons. A broad iron muzzle poked over the lip; huge tracked wheels sent earth spraying across the smashed cobbles. It was some kind of primitive tank, venting steam from a row of stacks, climbing up from the trenchworks. Behind it, serf trench troops were clambering onto the cobbled platform, shouting and waving their weapons.

The muzzle of the tank's main gun swivelled to point at the earth burrower, and the ponchos ran forward to engage the trench troops. The burrower's spiral screw began to spin, as if it was trying to get away.

It was all happening too quickly for Wake. *When in doubt, follow your gut.*

She made her choice. She ran forward, reaching for the burrower's closing hatches.

Before she got to the burrower, light flashed from the coast, dazzling, white and orange. Wake threw herself to the ground once more. The tank, the battling troops, were thrown into grotesque silhouette.

The noise arrived then, an immense clatter, so violent it rattled her chest cavity.

She lifted up her face. *Rocket light.* She stood up and shoved her way forward, past the dazzled, mesmerized troops, to the lip of the plateau.

The rockets on the coast had been launched. White smoke billowed in great plumes from the launch pads. She counted three, four, five of the slim white needles, thrusting towards the greenish sky on droplets of intense yellow light.

She felt panic clutch at her chest. *Too early! They launched too early! I'm not aboard, damn it!*

Then she looked more closely. The rising rockets were of a crude design: mostly fuel tank, with a small cone for payload at the tip. Too small to carry a human, or an Eetee.

They weren't spaceships, she realized. They were missiles.

It was impossible to be sure with the naked eye, but it looked as if they were climbing up to meet Mother, the bright, steady star in the south west.

The pieces fell into place quickly. *These ponchos had no intention of helping me. They want to destroy Mother. So I won't be able to bring down fire on their children, as I threatened... And when Mother's gone, they'll come for me.*

*One hell of a plan, Wake.*

But these primitives surely couldn't damage Mother, even if the missiles reached their target.

*She thought of the notched hills, the glassy crater.*

*Nukes. They have nukes. And they've used them already.*

Mother couldn't survive a nuclear attack.

Mother was powered by a colour-force drive: chromodynamics, the strong nuclear force. An order of magnitude more energy-dense than the weak forces involved in fission explosions. If the Eetees managed to disrupt Mother's hull, if the colour drive went up, then this damn planet would be wiped clean.

The nuclear-tipped missiles had almost risen out of sight. She turned and ran to Pod. It was the only place she might be safe.

The bands of Eetees, their shock at the launches fading, had started to wade into each other once again. Some of them broke off to chase after her. The burrower was pulling itself back into its pit in the ground.

She threw herself into Pod and dragged shut the canopy. Eetees clustered around Pod, hammering on the starred and scuffed surface.

*"Instructions."*

*"Heuristic algorithms,"* she said quickly.

Distorted frog faces pressed up against the crystal canopy. The sub-dermals embraced her.

A light blossomed above her, far brighter than the sun.

Thumbless hands scrabbled at the canopy, leaving trails of slime that blistered and burned dry.

Then even the shadows were burned away, and she was enfolded in light.



The lid lifted. Sunlight, bright orange, flooded Pod's interior, but a deep cold worked into her bones.

Wake pushed herself up. She felt weak, fragile. She pulled at the cloth of her flight suit; pieces of it came away in her fingers. *Rotted.*

She stood up. She had to stand still, as the sky spun around her. She felt as if she had been out for...

*How long?*

She stepped out of Pod. The sun hung in an empty, washed-out, green-blue sky, shedding no heat. No contrasts.

No Mother.

Some of the floor cobbles survived, but they were smashed, eroded smooth as pebbles. No grass-analogues grew between them. Ice coated the exposed earth. There was ash, soot, mixed in with the ice, little grains of it.

She walked to the lip of the plateau. The atmosphere was thin, as if she was at high altitude; her lungs strained, trying to extract oxygen from the cold air.

The valley was a sculpture in white and brown. Here and there rock, fused and glassy, protruded

through the compacted snow. It looked as if a glacier was forming here. There was no grass, no trees. Nothing moved. No bird sang. She could see no sign of the scar in the hillside left by Shuttle's crash.

She shielded her stinging eyes and looked out to the coast. The town was gone, the harbour. There was an angular form that looked like the stump of one of the launch gantries. Huge icicles dangled from it. On the sea, white glinted. Bergs.

The cold was astonishing.

She was gasping. The oxygen content was way down on what she'd observed before. She returned to Pod and pulled out an air mask, fitted it over her face. "Atmospheric content," she said to Pod. "Interpretation."

"Combustion of biota. Global. Free oxygen removed."

"But no replenishment?"

"Not observed. Oxygen levels continue to decline. Crew survival not assured."

"How long was I out?"

"Forty-two thousand, five hundred and —"

*Jesus. Tens of millennia.*

Long enough for the radioactive products of that last nuclear war and Mother's destruction to decay to harmlessness. Long enough for the ash of the burned biosphere to fall to the ground in rain and, later, snow; long enough for the ruined planet to tip to a new climatic equilibrium: permanent winter, coated with ice, reflecting most of the sun's heat back to space.

*Nothing left alive. I've killed the children of F'hann Lha. I've even killed the forests and the algae and the plankton, or whatever silicon-based equivalent used to pump oxygen into this air.*

*Crew survival not assured, indeed.*

She still had the locket around her neck. She took hold of the little pendant, held it up, turned it. It was dark. The hologram had failed, its tiny internal battery emptied.

She grieved.

*Now what?*

The random thought made her laugh, gasping into the mask.

*I've stranded myself in this spacetime pit: a hundred light years from home, and 40,000 years out of my time. Longer than my species existed on Earth, before my own birth.*

*Now here's my plan.*



Actually, she discovered after a while, she *did* have a plan.

Of course it was absurd. But the alternative was to give up.

She spent a day of consciousness, a whole precious day, working through her scheme.

She dug a hole in the frozen ground with her laser. She buried a heater in the permafrost, and stretched a power line between the heater and Pod.

She cannibalized Pod's digestive sac. She set it to process the inert soil into amino acids, nucleotide bases, sugars: aminos for proteins, bases and sugars for nucleic acids, the building blocks of terrestrial life.

She took a sample of her own stomach bacteria and stored it cryogenically. She set the capsule to release gut bacteria samples, at timed intervals.

Her scheme was simple, elemental. She would propagate terrestrial life on this planet.

She'd nurture life, for as long as it took, and repopulate the world. Next time she climbed out of Pod there should be carbon-based biomass that Pod could process to feed her.

It was a fine plan. All she had to do was create life, evolve a sentient race, and educate them to take her home: whatever she might find there, anyhow, after 40 millennia.

Simple. *If A fails, try B! If B fails, try C!*

While the machinery was setting up, she sat on the frozen ground, her knees tucked up against her chest, and thought about F'han Lha. F'han, whose descendants she had wiped out of history. All to save herself.

The morality of it was too big for her. All she'd been doing was following her training, damn it.

Wake was no hero. She wouldn't pretend to be. She'd been out here doing a job, for a fixed term, for a salary. Now things had gone wrong, and she just wanted to go home. Lying down and dying wasn't in her job description.

That ought to be enough morality for anybody.

It hurt her to think about it.

She climbed, without regret, back into Pod.

"Instructions."

"Open on request." *From the rescue team, golden, wise, advanced.* "Or on reverse of oxygen trend. Or on detection of significant terrestrial biomass. Or —"

She hesitated.

Pod waited, infinitely patient.

"Or, after five million years."

She enfolded the locket in her hand. She was shamed to realize that its tiny failure upset her more than the death of this alien world. She rested her closed fist on her chest.

She closed her eyes.



She was immersed in white. Pod's canopy was so badly scarred and frosted over she couldn't see out of it.

She lifted her hand from her chest. Dust trickled out of her closed fist. That had been the locket. *Oh, shit.*

"How long?"

Pod's voice was blurred by phasing. "Five million —"

The canopy opened, but with a creak. Thick, ancient ice snapped away from the hinge. Air flooded in, needle-cold.

It was day, again, in this remote future. The sky was still green-blue. She stood. Save for her boots she was naked, her flight suit long rotted away.

The ground was still ice-bound, locked by permafrost. There were layers upon layers of ice now, the ash of burned biomass long buried. The valley — desolate, empty — fell away from her towards a white-flecked sea, apparently unchanged. She felt her lungs drag at the air. She could check with Pod, but she was sure the oxygen content hadn't increased.

Before Pod, there was a neat disc of melted mud, a



hundred feet wide, set in the white-coated ground. As she watched, a huge bubble rose and broke, belching, from its interior.

She took a multiprobe from Pod and stepped, stiffly, out of the compartment.

She could feel the cold of the ground through her boots. Her lungs ached already. She couldn't feel her bare skin, but she could see the goosebumps down her arms, see the frosting of her breath. She couldn't stay out here for long.

She reached the melted circle, and thrust in the probe.

There were aminos and nucleotides and sugars in there. There were organisms which had evolved, significantly, from her gut bacteria. *How about that. Maybe the plan is going to pay off.*

Naked, alone in the spacetime pit, shivering over the muddy, primeval pond, she laughed at herself.



It was late afternoon, here, five million years deep in the future. She decided to use up another few precious hours of consciousness, to see the night fall. She climbed back into Pod and tried to get warm, wrapping her arms round her bare body.

She plumbed Pod's memory for details of photosynthesis. That was what her little colony needed, to become self-sustaining, to feed from the plentiful sunlight. Pod told her that the first photosynthetic organisms on Earth were colonies of bacteria. They left behind fossils the size of basketballs, called stromatolites...

Wake tried to listen, but could take in very little of this, could make no plans on the basis of the information. She didn't have any resources, anyhow. Her gut-bacteria children would have to make their own way.

Night fell. The stars came out. She inspected the sky. Five million years was enough time to colonize the Galaxy. So close to Earth as this, she'd expect to see *signs*: stars rearranged to suit human needs, encased in immense structures, Dyson spheres.

The constellations she saw were random, the spaces between them empty, unstructured.

Was humanity extinct, then? Or fallen back to Earth, its grandiose ambitions lost?

She was alone here.

She lay back in her couch, and let the sub-dermals crawl over her, unfeeling.

"Instructions."

*When you're in a pit, and you can't climb out, what do you do?*

*You keep digging, she told herself.*

"Half a billion years," she said.



Rain pelted against the canopy, thick, heavy drops. Beyond Pod was darkness.

Her boots had gone, and so had most of the soft material in Pod; only hard surfaces remained.

She climbed out. The rain fell against her face. It was warm. When she touched her scalp she found no hair. No eyebrows, lashes, pubic hair.

It looked like day, but the clouds were thick, heavy. She couldn't see anything of the valley, but the basic

geology seemed more or less unchanged. On this little plateau the ice was gone, the ground turned uniformly to mud. Her feet sank into the ground; she found it hard to pull her ankles free for each new step.

She couldn't even tell where her primeval-life pond had been.

She let the rain run into her mouth. It was silty, muddy, salty. Sea-bottom mud.

This planet had suffered an impact: a comet, an asteroid maybe.

It happened, in every stellar system, if you hung around long enough. Life on Earth had been obliterated dozens of times, by impacts in the primeval Solar System, before catching hold. Maybe it had happened here.

She dug around in Pod, in the intervals she could function outside the canopy, trying to see if she could recreate her nutrient pond. But most of Pod's systems had failed, or were rotting away. Pod had been smart, she saw, in cannibalizing its own components in order to keep the basic life-support functions operating. Good design, by some anonymous engineer a half-billion years dead. Stretching my handful of days across aeons, always diminishing but never finishing, like a paradox of infinite convergent series... She wasn't expert enough to see what she could take out of this mess and use, that wouldn't finally wreck Pod.

Maybe it didn't matter. If her gut-bacteria babies had survived the impact, maybe they were flourishing, scattered, breeding, somewhere on this warm, wet world. There was nothing more she could do, anyhow.

She brushed the rain off her flesh, as best she could, and climbed back into Pod.

"Instructions."

She listened to the rain against the canopy. It reminded her of L5: the artificial rain storms beating against the walls, when she'd cradled Ben until he'd slept.

She was taking great strides into her pit now, leaping from home in huge logarithmic strides.

"Let's see if the series converges," she said.

"Instructions."

"I'm sorry, Pod. Five billion years."



She couldn't get out of Pod.

Out there it was hot enough now to melt lead, so hot she'd be immediately killed. And besides there was no oxygen.

The clouds overhead were thick, unbroken. A diffuse yellow light shone over baked, shattered ground. Even the geology had evolved: the emptied ocean bed was lifted up, the old mountains eroded and dipped.

Now Pod rested on a plain of shattered, broken plates.

Pod had been forced to repair essential subsystems with raw materials taken from the planet. She could see, through the canopy, that it looked as if Pod's base had melted, flowed across square metres of the landscape, seeping into the fabric of this world.

All the oxygen in the air was gone, and carbon dioxide had baked out of the vanished ocean, the rocks, to

form a blanket over the planet. The planet had become a Venus; it had fallen into the other classic stable-climate model, for a dead terrestrial world.

Her life seed had failed.

*So much for the plan.*

Pod showed her images it had gathered, through breaks in the clouds, and from non-optical sensors. The sun had grown huge, and it hovered on the southwestern horizon. This battered old world had become tidally locked to its parent.

And there were fewer stars in the sky, it seemed to her.

She'd come so far, the galaxy itself was starting to die.

She lay down. The sub-dermals were faulty, and she had to lift them into place.

"Instructions."

She felt a morbid curiosity. *I want to see how it finishes.*

"Go on. Indefinitely."

"Instructions."

"Until something changes, damn it."

Maybe something would turn up, as the laws of physics unravelled.

*Sure.* Her situation was ridiculous. It was still less than a week, subjectively, since she'd taken that sauna in Mother, before descending on this routine survey. Now, she was probably the only human left alive, anywhere.

*I wish I'd died, when Shuttle came down. At least those damn Eetees would have enjoyed a little life.*

She closed her eyes.

∞ ∞ ∞

There was a dull red glow beyond the canopy. She sat up, entrapped like some homunculus in a bell-jar. Through the crystal's protection she could feel the temperature. *Too damn hot.* Pod was failing at last.

It was almost a relief.

The red glow was nothing to do with the Venusian clouds, which had burned away. So had the rest of the atmosphere, in fact. The planet was more like the Moon now: cracked, battered, ancient. Pod had half-melted into the regolith coating the planet, a thin dust gardened by aeons of micrometeorite strikes.

The red glow was the G8-class sun. It was leaving the Main Sequence. Its core, exhausted of hydrogen, had collapsed; helium was fusing now, pumping energy into the outer layers, ballooning them out in a last, extravagant gesture. Soon, all the system's inner planets would be consumed. Including this one.

The warmth was pleasant. It reminded her of the Shelter on L5. When Ben had been small, and still hers.

"Crew loss scenario," said Pod thickly.

"It's all right," she said. "Don't be frightened."

The canopy dissolved, and light enfolded her.

**Stephen Baxter & Eric Brown**, the most famous sf writers to live, respectively, in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, and Haworth, West Yorkshire, last appeared here in collaboration with "Sunfly" (issue 100).

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# S L O W F A M I N E

Sean McMullen

I do not enjoy stalking the undead. That may come as a strange admission from someone who has done so for 900 years, but it is true. The thought weighed heavily on my mind as the *Alpha* sailed slowly up to the Melbourne Town wharves through the midwinter drizzle of 1842. According to Roberts, the *Alpha's* master, the place had been forest a mere seven years earlier, but now over 10,000 souls lived there.

I hired a pony gig at the wharf and bundled my luggage onto it.

"Do you know Melbourne Town well?" I asked the driver. "I have just arrived from Launceston."

"Been here from the beginnin'," he drawled in a Midlands accent. "Came over with Fawknor's people on the schooner *Enterprise* in '35."

"Then take me to a good hotel and be quick about it, if you please."

"Why be hurried, sir?" he asked as he flicked the reins and set us rattling along the street. "Nobody's a-hurried in Melbourne Town."

Sir. I generally go about as a man to have greater freedom, but even after so many centuries the assumption can surprise me.

"I have a debtor to catch," I explained. "If I'm not quick he will hear of me and abscond again."

"An elderly gent like you, a-huntin' debtors?"

"Age is no hobble," I replied, displaying the Colt five-shot beneath my coat.

"Ah ha, fine machine. Melbourne's the world debtor capital, did ye know? Many a fine gentleman's bought Melbourne land on notes o' credit, but now land prices be down and they all be debtors."

He gestured down Elizabeth Street as we passed. It was wide and well appointed, but the surface was a quagmire of mud and ditches where dogs and goats scavenged.

"No money for the public good, sir. Why only last month another child drowned in one o' those ditches. 'Tis a wild place, Melbourne Town, with but few hon-

est constables for 10,000 souls. Aye, and so many rogues among 'em."

A wild and lawless boomtown, that suited me well for I was a killer and outside the law. Melbourne was a melting pot of the dynamic and hopeless: the pioneers who wanted to carve a future out of the bushland, newly released convicts, dispossessed Aborigines stupefied with rum, government functionaries building a curriculum vitae to take elsewhere, speculators growing rich on credit, and speculators going bankrupt for the lack thereof.

The Albion Hotel was just like an English coaching inn, and attracted a good and prosperous clientele. I was given an upstairs bedroom lit by a dormer window, and I was relieved by the clean comfort of the place after the turmoil and squalor of the streets. In the early afternoon I began my search, but it got off to a bad start. I wandered the streets until I came upon the Red Lion Inn, a humble little place at the west end of town. I ordered lunch, and as it was served I asked the publican where houses of pleasure were to be found. His wife, a most fearsome woman, overheard and let fly with such a tirade against loose morals that I abandoned my lunch and fled. At the Lamb Inn I had better luck, but it was tempered with a warning.

"Ha ha, you'd be the cove who caught Mrs McGuire's tongue a half-hour back," drawled a loafer that I approached. "So, you'd wantin' to find our nymphs of the pave, old cock?"

"Might be," I replied, flipping a shilling into the air. "I like nice girls, who stay overnight and tell no tales later."

"Try Mother Newberry's, in Flinders Lane near Market Reserve. There's two big berries painted on the door, like."

He combined a wink and a leer, and I tossed the coin to him and departed. Surprise was still my ally, yet I was appalled at how fast word of the incident

with Mrs McGuire had spread. Mother Newberry's establishment was a stone and timber cottage of three rooms, and I paid in advance to question her. Rather than asking about Lord Southern, I invented a fictitious wife for my fictitious son and pretended to be searching the world for her.

"Nah, I seen no nymph as yer describe, Mr Maynard," responded Mother Newberry, a surprisingly young ex-convict from Sydney. "Girls' looks change real quick in the game, though, so who knows? Yer say she'd be likely ter work gentlemen?"

"Caroline was well brought up," I said anxiously. "She would not lie with mere sailors and navvies."

"Dunno 'bout that, sar. Times is 'ard."

"Please, stop!" I cried, putting my hands over my ears. "Just help me find her."

"Cor, all right then, easy! Ye're sure she's out 'ere, then?"

"She was a servant. My son and – well, they eloped and married against my wishes. I am a man of means, so I – I arranged for her to be sent her away. I told my son that she had run off with a sailor but he learned the truth. Melancholy has been consuming him for five years, and now he is close to death. I repented, and began searching the world for his lost darling. I tracked her to here: a ship's officer that I met in Liverpool said that he talked with a tipsy harlot in Port Phillip in 1841. She said her real name was Caroline, and that she was really married to a very important gentleman..."

I allowed my voice to trail away.

"Yeah, yeah, I sees the problem," Mother Newbury sighed, sounding convinced.

"He met her at Woolpack Inn." I had heard a sailor on the *Alpha* mention the place.

"That's in Williamstown. Commander Gorden cleared out the houses o' pleasure in Williamstown about this time last year, damn 'is eyes, so most nymphs came 'ere ter Melbourne. Look, if Caroline's the type ter work gentlemen, I got a list of nymphs for 'appointment,' as I calls it. They're good girls in honest employ as scrubbers and such, not the type ter lie with sailors and troopers but, well, money's money, and there's gentlemen about who likes an occasional night with a clean nymph who won't tattle. They sends a man with a gig, and I arranges a nymph. For ten pounds I'd let yer see me list and write down such names as yer fancied."

I gave her the money and copied the list. For the rest of the day I negotiated the foul puddles, mud, tree stumps, savage dogs and insolent loafers of Melbourne Town as I visited each of the "appointment" women in turn. To these I said that I was searching for a long-lost brother, an exiled nobleman. I had thought that Lord Southern would stand out like a beacon in such a frontier setting, but Melbourne Town turned out to be flush with exiled aristocracy. Just as Sydney and other Australian towns had been penal stations where the criminals of Britain were dumped, so now was Melbourne Town a place where the odd, dissolute, demented or spendthrift embarrassments of the English upper class were sent. It was not a widely known fact, but it made sense. The settlement was

remote and dangerous, but with good prospects for the industrious. A compulsive young gambler from a good family could be sent there, ostensibly to make his fortune – but he would also be safely out of sight and liable to be dead within a year or two.

By evening I had a lead. The undead never allow portraits to be made of them, but I had seen Lord Southern at a ball five years earlier. Later I had done a sketch of his face from memory, and it was a fair likeness. At least two dozen men had Mother Newberry's "appointments" stay overnight from time to time, but three of the women thought that they recognized the face of my sketch. All three named Mr James Slater of Brighton, south of the city. I bought a horse, then called at the Lamb Inn for dinner and a game of billiards. I feigned being suspiciously at ease with the locals, laughing, drinking ale and asking after a fictional debtor who might live at Brighton.

The next day, an hour before dawn but in bright moonlight, I roused the punt operator and crossed the Yarra River with my horse. The track south was all ruts, mud, deep sand and tree stumps, and the surrounding country was thickly grown with gum trees and scrub. I saw nobody else as I rode, and by the time the sun was up I was perhaps a mile from the house where James Salter resided. Like war, hunting the undead is months, even years of tedium culminating in a moment of intense terror. That moment was near, and my heart was already pounding.

I noticed a pony gig approaching, driven by a well-kempt but nondescript man with a woman beside him. She was muffled against the cold winter air, and I did not recognize her as we passed – but she knew me.

"Pete, that's him, that's the cove who was askin' about Mr Slater!"

The driver was caught as much by surprise as I was. We continued on until perhaps 50 feet apart before he thought to draw a carbine from under the seat and take aim as I sat half-turned in the saddle.

"Pete, no!" the woman screamed, seizing his arm as he fired. I was hit just below the ribs. My horse reared and I was flung into long grass beside the track. I lay still.

"Damn yor eyes!" the man roared.

"Please Pete, I didn't mean it, honest I didn't." Her voice was shrill with terror. "I thought you'd lost your senses."

"Shut up and don't move!" His accent was cockney, his voice hoarse and breathless.

I drew my Colt Patent Revolver with my right hand, slowly, smoothly, then thumbed the striker back until the trigger clicked free of the stock. There were five shots in the chamber, but the first would count most. Pain burned like hot coals in my intestines, and I could feel my hands shaking as I listened to footsteps approaching. He was coming straight over, he might not have reloaded his carbine.

I wrenched myself up through a boiling spasm of pain and fired – but missed! He flung a knife aside and drew a Derringer from his coat as I knifed the Colt's hammer back and fired two, three, four, five times. Half-deafened by the blasts, I watch the man

fall, his right eye obliterated by my single hit. As I got to my knees the woman just sat there with her arms held tightly against her breasts and her fists beneath her chin.

"I seen it all, guv'ner," she suddenly blurted in a quavering voice. "I'll tell Judge Willis that Pete Hooper took a shot at you an' —"

"That's enough! Help me get him to the gig."

With blood seeping between the fingers of my left hand I helped her heave the body across the poles of the gig behind the pony. My own horse, which seemed suspiciously at ease after such an exchange of gunfire, was grazing nearby and the woman easily caught him and tied the reins to the gig. I had her scuff sand over the blood on the road before we left.

It was only as she climbed up beside me that I realized she was one of Mother Newberry's "arrangement" nymphs. Letitia was a laundress. She was in her 40s, but she had a plump, pleasant figure and pretty face after what had obviously been a hard life. I turned off into a nearby break in the bush and the pony managed to force its way through a hundred yards of scrub until we reached a clearing. We dragged the body off the poles then Letitia stood back, her hands clasped and her shoulders hunched as I drew my argenter dagger.

"Oh Lord, no guv, I'm not ready —"

"Quiet, this is not for you," I snapped, doubled over with pain and with my vision starting to blur. "Unbutton his shirt, all they way down."

While she was turned away I thumbed out a little spike in the argenter's handle, and the point sank into the flesh of my palm as I gripped the handle tightly. I knelt beside the body, opposite Letitia.

"What do you mean to do?" she gasped as I raised the dagger. "He's dead, there's a bullet through his head, he's up there explainin' his sins to the Almighty —"

I stabbed down with all my strength. Letitia shrieked as the corpse gave a hissing yowl. The surviving eye bulged and dead hands tore at my fist as I pressed the argenter down. A warm tingle spread through my fist and up my arm, then Hooper's body became truly still.

"He were alive!" babbled Letitia. "Lord in Heaven, but he were alive with a hole shot through his eye."

"Not alive, undead," I said as the tingling continued. "Do you have a needle and cotton in your bag?"

She nodded. The body's flesh seemed to sag as the tingling stopped, and I withdrew the blade and wiped it on the wet grass. Letitia was speechless as I removed my coat, and then she fainted at the sight of the shirt beneath all soaked in blood. While she lay senseless I rummaged in her bag. I found cheap perfume, a knife, and a folder of sheepgut sheaths before I came upon her sewing kit and began patching the hole in my coat. Presently she groaned and sat up.

"It really happened," I said before she could speak.

"Who — what was he?"

"Do you know the word vampyre?"

"Vam — vampyre? Can't say as I have, but it has a bad sound."

I explained about vampyres, about how they were

transformed humans, neither dead nor alive who were sustained by the blood of living people. Should a mortal taste a vampyre's blood, then upon dying he — or she — also becomes a vampyre in turn.

"They are paralysed by day but invincible by night and as strong as ten men. Only argenter daggers deter them, daggers made of nickel and iron that has fallen from the sky and been inlaid with silver. Only something from beyond this world can kill something not of this world."

"I don't rightly follow all that."

"Look... the man you know as Mr Slater is Lord Southern, a vampyre that I have stalked for many years. The late Mr Hooper guarded him by day and served him by night. In return he was given a drop or two of the vampyre's blood so that upon dying, he too would become a vampyre. Live mortals who are destined to become undead are called neophytes."

"You're jokin'!" she squealed. "You mean Pete wanted to be, uh, like that?"

"It has its attractions. Vampyres draw the vitality from the living, as well as their blood. It restores their youth, sustains them through centuries of existence, and even heals wounds. They are also said to get sensual pleasure from the act of biting."

"Get aht!" she said, giving me a playful push. "Dead folk doin' it, I never heard such a thing. Give that coat here, I've patched many a hole like that in Melbourne Town."

Her fingers were deft and nimble, and the rent slowly dissolved back into the cloth.

"Pete and his guv'ner kept asking me about raptors," she said as she worked.

"That is the vampyres' term for my kind. In Latin it means thief or plunderer."

"So you rob the vampyres, then?"

"I — ah, yes, of their immortality." And more besides, much more.

"I was wonderin'... I mean, like his lordship used my services, if you get my meaning. Am I a neo-thing, I mean will I become —"

"Describe your liaisons," I said curtly.

"Once a month Pete would take me out to the Brighton house in the gig. Mr — his lordship was respectable, like always well dressed and groomed, you know? Sort of regal, I mean I'm not surprised he's a nobleman. We drank a bit —"

"Did you ever see him drink?"

"No, come to think of it. I'd go to his bedchamber and undress in the dark, then he'd come in and mount up. He rode hard, like, and I always wore out and dozed off. Pete would take me back in the morning, they were kind and all."

I sat back, leaning against a wheel of the gig as I reloaded my Colt.

"Your drink was drugged. It was Hooper who entered in the darkness and coupled with you. Once you were comatose Lord Southern would enter, sink his fangs into your neck and drink your blood."

"You're barmy! Nothin' like that ever happened."

"You wear high collars to conceal lovebites."

"Why, that I do. I may work as a nymph a-times, but I'm not some bold slut."

"The fang-marks are small and rendered painless by the vampyre's saliva, so you'd not notice them. Will you unbutton your collar for me?"

She nodded reluctantly, then put my coat down and bared her neck. There, amid Hooper's oval lovebites, were two puncture marks.

"Will I end up like Pete?" she asked fearfully as she buttoned her collar.

"Have you even licked blood from a scratch on Lord Southern's skin?"

"Never."

"Then you are not a neophyte."

She considered this, still frowning.

"You said his lordship has the strength of ten men, yet has to sleep by day."

"Yes."

"But Pete were a-movin' and the was sun up," she said with a wave at the sky.

I shook my head. "Neophytes only become vampyres after being killed. Pete would have risen at the moment of sunset, except..." I held up the argenter and pointed it at his body. "With very old vampyres it is more dramatic. They crumble to dust."

She picked up my coat and began working at the bullet hole again. Her sewing was excellent, and when she was done the rent was not noticeable unless one knew to look for it. I stood up and buttoned the coat, and was relieved that none of the blood on the shirt beneath could be seen.

"You'd better let me tend that hole in you," said Letitia as she got to her feet.

That would never do. My breasts were not large, but they most definitely did not belong on a man. Besides, my wound had already been healed by vitality conducted out of Hooper's heart along the argenter's blade but she did not need to know that.

"I'm not hurt badly, but it's sweet of you to be concerned," I replied with a smile.

"You're a nice one," she giggled as she gave me another push. "Tough as bullock driver, yet handsome for an elderly gent."

"Strength and age are not excuses for bad grooming."

She slipped an arm about my waist. "It's nice out here."

"You mean to couple with me," I stated baldly. She blinked and stared hard at my face.

"What's the matter? Is it because I'm a whore —"

She stopped, breathing rapidly as if to hold back sobs. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"This is neither the time or the place for dalliance, Letitia. I am a raptor soldier, and this is my battlefield. I must be on my guard constantly, for I do not have the supernatural powers of the enemies that I hunt. If I am killed I shall not rise from the grave at the next sunset."

That much was true, at least.

"Who are you then?"

I shrugged. "A raptor. One of a brotherhood of mortals dedicated to ridding the world of undead predators."

That was more of a lie. We raptors draw vitality from vampyres as we kill them, vitality that cures disease, heals wounds and reverses ageing. I am mortal, yet I once served at the table of William the Conqueror.

Letitia folded her arms, half turned, then regarded me through her eyelashes.

"When Lord Southern has your dagger in his heart, perhaps then we can do some legplay?" she asked smirkingly. "I really do fancy you."

"Most likely," I lied again.

She frowned, as if she could sniff out a lie like a hunting dog after game. As I untied my horse and mounted up she stood rubbing her chin, deep in thought.

"Stay here while I ride on to Lord Southern's house," I told her. "When I return we shall go —"

"Guv, I got lots of customers what has me stay overnight, but there's a few as doesn't show a reflection in my little powderin' mirror. I thought it might be 'cause I were tipsy and all but —"

"What!" I exclaimed, leaping down at once. I had not mentioned that property of vampyres to her. "Are you sure, who are they?" I demanded. "Names, names, names!"

I found myself seizing the lapels of her coat. I forced myself to let go and began patterned breathing exercises to calm myself. She smiled knowingly.

"Each of 'em leaves me weak and giddy when I get up to go home in the mornin'."

The thought of what she was implying was making my head spin.

"Name a price," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

"No price, guv, just make me into the Caroline from that tale you told Mother Newberry."

Damn! Gossip obviously spread through Melbourne Town with the speed of winged Mercury.

"Look here, I have no son, you must have guessed that. I'll give you £2,000, you could persuade any number of ruined Melbourne gentlemen to wed you for that."

"Ah ha ha, not likely," she replied. "Guv, last Thursday I saw a show at the Royal Vic. It was called *Catching an Heiress*, I do have a taste for culture. I'd been mendin' the costumes, so I was allowed to watch from the wings. The like of me is not welcome to sit with respectable ladies. Mind, their menfolk share themselves with me for a fee —"

"Get to the point!"

"Money's not enough. The heiress in that show was only wanted for her money. Even with your £2,000 I'd still be a damned whore who made good and married a ruined gentleman. Were I to leave Melbourne Town as your 'son's' wife I'd be a respectable lady who fell on bad times then got saved by her father-in-law. I want to rub Melbourne Town faces in horse apples when I leave here, guv, do you follow? Back in England, well now, £2,000 is all the money I need to live comfortable-like till me dying day."

This was awkward, but not impossible. I thought carefully for some moments before I committed myself.

"Give me proof and I'll lodge papers to declare that you are my long-lost daughter-in-law. I'll tell everyone I'm here to clear your name, then I'll book you on the first ship out of here and you can leave in triumph. Is that to your satisfaction?"

"I... should think so. Well then, luvey, let's go to town. There's a diary under my mattress, and in there I've recorded services provided to certain gentlemen since I arrived here. I had a mind to publish it one day and turn a lot of faces red, but what you'll give me for it is far better. You will soon work out who are your vampyres and neophytes."

"And addresses, are they in the diary?"

She put her hands on her hips and laughed.

"Ah ha ha ha, I'm not silly. When I got papers calling me Mrs Maynard, then we talk addresses."

It was late morning when we reached town. The diary was all that Letitia had promised, there were at least six vampyres residing in the Port Phillip area! True to my promise I lodged papers declaring Letitia to be my son's wife, then made a big show of booking her a passage on the *Timbo*, which was to sail the next day. As we set about shopping for her voyage we spread word that I was staying behind to settle certain matters of honour while Letitia sailed by herself for London via Sydney. True to her fondest hopes, we caused a sensation. Soon there was talk of very little else among the frontier aristocracy of Melbourne.

All the while I pondered my good luck. So many undead, and all in one place. I had spent 25 years searching since my last undead victim, and there had been a real risk that I would have died of old age without finding another vampire. Now this. Why were they all here? True, it was a remote and unlikely place, but that was somehow not enough to explain it.

All that night I sat awake with the argenter in my hand, going over maps, addresses and diary entries. Letitia would not let me out of her sight, and stayed awake altering her new dresses and coats to better suit her figure. There was distant drunken singing and even the occasional gunshot from the streets outside, but I had been in wilder, rougher places than this and was not worried. What set my hair on end was the slight scratching and scurrying outside the dormer window on the roof. Something was outside, something that the argenter's aura kept at bay. Letitia sewed on, oblivious. An hour before dawn it stopped, for it had to return all the way to Brighton.

At sunrise I hired a gig and took Letitia and her trunks to the wharf. There was a crowd of several dozen gathered, some of them Letitia's friends, others merely curious to see the real-life happy ending acted out before their eyes. We shed tears, called each other daughter and father, and said endearing and forgiving things for the onlookers to hear. Twelve guests of Her Majesty and their guards who were also going to Sydney cheered Letitia as she went aboard the *Timbo*, then everyone on the wharf cheered as the schooner cast off.

Even before the vessel was out of sight I was riding for the punt to cross the river. As my gelding cantered

along the track to Brighton my mind was still a-whirl with what I had found. Six undead! Six vampyres, all in one town. They were always solitary in Europe, so as not to attract the attention of us raptors. Too many victims of anaemia in one place and one of us would be sure to investigate. I had only come to Melbourne Town after learning that Lord Southern had invested in the place. Of course many people invest overseas without ever leaving England, but I had no other clue and I was desperate – I certainly had no inkling of this whole community of six undead. There were no tales of dozens of victims with fang-marks on their necks, it was as if Mother Newberry had –

I reined my gelding in so hard that he reared. That was it! Mother Newberry was in league with them. She was probably a neophyte, her price for running a refuge where vampyres could feed with discretion. When she died she would become immortal, then feed on mortals' blood in the safety of a haven of her own creation. I was near the place where I had left Hooper's body, so I turned off the track and rode until I came to the clearing. The pony was grazing quietly, still harnessed to the gig, but wild dogs had gnawed Hooper's face. Within minutes I had exchanged clothing with the corpse, then I drove the gig back onto the track, leaving my own horse to roam free.

As I neared Lord Southern's house in the Brighton bushland I drew back the hammer of my Colt and left it loose under my coat. Something glinted at a window in the weak winter sunlight. Keep your nerve, don't show alarm, I told myself. There was no gunshot, but as I drew up before the stone house the door was flung open and Mother Newberry appeared, a Hall breechblock loader in one hand. I casually threw the gig's brake.

"Where the hell have you been, Pete Hooper?" she demanded. "A raptor's in town, he held Lord Southern off with an argenter all last night and – you!!"

We fired almost together, but my aim was less hasty than hers. Fearful of who may have been drawn by the shots, I pushed her body aside and closed the door.

Beneath a Persian rug was a trapdoor to a wine cellar the size of a small room, and I descended carrying a lamp and axe. After 900 years of practice I had become an expert with locks and secret doorways, and I soon discovered that one of the wine racks hinged outwards and sideways. My lamp illuminated an alcove lined with gold and red velvet, with a marble casket at the centre. The lid was heavier than I could lift, but I had been expecting that. I smashed the marble lid into manageable pieces with the axe, and was rewarded by the sight of Lord Southern himself. Now in a frenzy I drew the argenter, thumbed out the spur and stabbed down. For perhaps half an hour I absorbed his vitality, feeling the aches and pains of aging being burned out of my body until Lord Southern was no more than dust within fine clothing.

I sealed the alcove and climbed out of the cellar to where Mother Newberry lay dead by the door. The skin of my hands was now smoother, and my pocket mirror showed a face of mere early middle age. Mother Newberry would be undead now, so I rolled

her over, unbuttoned her blouse and stabbed. Nothing. No blaze of undead vitality, nothing. I might as well have stabbed another mortal or... another raptor!

There was no way to tell from her body alone. Raptors are mortal without their undead prey, but there was one item that we are never far from. I felt beneath her skirts, and strapped to her thigh was a lead sheath containing an argenter. The heraldic crest on theommel was French. Angelique! She had supposedly died in the French Revolution, yet some had said that she was merely in hiding. Neither vampires nor raptors wait 50 years between incarnations, however, so I had assumed her to be truly dead. At some stage she had obviously moved to the other side of the world, pretended to be a neophyte, and begun cultivating a flock of gullible undead.

A raptor cultivating undead! It was unthinkable, the very idea revolted me. Raptors existed to keep the scourge of vampyrism in check, not to foster it for their own advantage. That was the basis of our entire theology and morality... yet perhaps what Angelique/Mother Newberry had done was understandable. We raptors had been very successful during the 18th century, so much so that there were very few vampires left to sustain us. Our numbers were dwindling as we grew old and died. How many other raptors besides Angelique had decided that immortality was our right, rather than a reward for controlling the undead, that the famine of our own creation need not be killing us?

I looted a cache of banknotes from the house, then – still dressed as Pete Hooper – I hid Angelique's body in the gig's tray and drove back to the clearing. Hooper's body was dressed as me, and thanks to the wild dogs his face was bloody pulp. When the bodies were found, a double murder would be suspected: myself and Mother Newberry shot by Hooper, no doubt over Letitia's honour.

All through that Sunday of August 28th, 1842 I toured a list of houses in bushland settings, shooting down neophyte guards and stabbing their torpid masters, gorging on vitality. By the late afternoon I had the face and body of a girl of no more than 17. I drove the gig into Melbourne Town with my cap low and collar high, my face rubbed with dirt. It was time for rebirth.

At the Albion Hotel I entered as Hooper, dashed upstairs and let myself into my room. Some of Letitia's discarded clothing was still there, and I hurriedly scrubbed my face and dressed in her skirts, then stuffed my disguise into the bag of gold and banknotes collected during my day of carnage. I slipped out by the stables, then came back in through the front door. Mr Dobson, the licensee, was speaking with two constables about Hooper being on the premises and acting suspiciously.

"Pardon me, but do you have any rooms vacant?" I declared. Girlish timidity was not easy to feign after going about as a man for as long as I had.

Dobson hurried over to me and directed me into his office as the constables climbed the stairs.

"Please, do not be alarmed," he said urgently. "A

ruffian has burst in here uninvited, but the constables will soon have him packing. Have you just arrived in Melbourne Town?"

"Yes, on the Black Swan. I was looking at land around Western Port Bay."

He nodded and opened his register. "Now then, you wanted a room for your self and, ah..."

"Just myself."

Dobson gasped and looked up. "You're travelling without a chaperone?" he exclaimed in disbelief.

"Why yes. I'm not as young as I look and besides, I – I'm American. I was brought up on the Western Plains. Sir, I shot two outlaws and five wolves before I was 15. When my parents died of cholera I decided to make a clean break and start a new life on the other side of the world."

If you are going to lie, be magnificent. Dobson assigned me a room and gave me a key just as the constables returned. Hooper was gone, they reported, but Mr Maynard's room was open and the key was in the door. If Hooper had used Maynard's key, how did he come by it and what had been Maynard's fate? I said that where I came from we would just hunt down a varmint like Hooper and shoot him, then I retired to my new room before anyone realized that I had but a single bag for my luggage.

Thus did I end my second day in Melbourne Town, yet I was not to leave there for another 23 years. In that time I first became the successful licensee of my own hotel, then made a fortune during the gold rush of the 1850s. I established a charity for the town's harlots, helping the living find other work and managing the business of the dead – including Angelique as Mother Newberry. Thus did I watch and wait, killing all raptors who arrived and asked after her. By this year of 1865 I have the argenter daggers of five raptors in a lead lined casket in my bedchamber safe. One raptor even arrived with two vampires in crates lined with argenter metal... and the folk of Melbourne Town marvelled at how I suddenly seemed ten years younger.

For all this, I am not happy. The guards have betrayed the guarded. Some raptors had betrayed humanity to preserve their own kind of immortality, yet if raptors should die out while a few vampires linger, then who would stop their spread in the years that followed? Was Angelique right to do what she did? Should I do the same, am I making lame excuses to cling to immortality? Every year I ask those questions at her grave side, and her own death is always her reply. As each new grey hair appears amid my auburn curls, that reply becomes more convincing. While I was Maynard I grew old for the first time in 900 years, and I did not like it at all.

Sean McMullen's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Pacing the Nightmare" (issue 59) and "A Ring of Green Fire" (issue 89). The interview with him which follows is a considerably revised version of one that is due to appear in the Australian small-press magazine *Aurealis*.

# VOICES IN THE LIGHT

## from a Ring of Green Fire

Sean McMullen is a science-fiction writer living in a bay-side suburb of Melbourne, Australia. He first achieved international recognition when he won the World SF Convention writing competition in 1985. McMullen followed this with a number of professional sales within Australia before he sold "The Colours of the Masters" to *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1988, which went on to reach the Nebula Award preliminary ballot for that year. Since then his short stories have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies around the world. The collection *Call to the Edge* (Aphelion, 1992) contains the best of his short fiction from the first six years of his professional career.

*Voices in the Light* (Aphelion, 1994), McMullen's first novel, was widely praised in the UK and USA as well as Australia and led to the coining of the term Medieval Cyberpunk. It is based around some of his early short stories and forms the first part of the "Greatwinter" series. His second novel, *Mirrorsun Rising* (Aphelion, 1995), the only Australian science-fiction novel on the *Locus* recommended reading list for 1995, continues the series which will conclude with a third novel called *The Miocene Arrow*.

When he is not writing, Sean works as a strategic planner in the computer section of the Australian Bureau of Meteorology. He has a masters degree from Melbourne University, and he has studied physics, mathematics, computer science, English literature and history. He has also sung with the Victorian State Opera, was lead singer in a folk-rock band, and holds a second dan karate black belt.

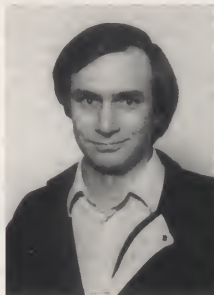
**PAULSEN:** *You built your initial reputation as an sf writer with a number of excellent short stories. You have now consolidated that position with two well-received novels. How did you find the transition from short-story writer to novelist?*

**McMULLEN:** I suppose I never really had to make the transition to novels from short fiction because I was always writing both. I finished and submitted the first version of *Voices in the Light* back in 1986, a month after my first professional short story was published in *Omega*. From 1986

to 1993 I was persuaded to do all sorts of rewrites on advice from people supposedly in the know (e.g. "Write Glasken out of the novel, he's much too immoral for the American market to tolerate"), then Peter McNamara (Aphelion Publications) arrived on the scene and accepted the novel after a few trivial changes and it was published in 1994.

*What are you striving for in your short fiction?*

I think that the ideal short story should do its job in around 5,000 words. It's a challenge getting the reader's interest, raising sympathy for the characters, and building into a powerful climax in that length, yet it's great when it works. For example, my first story in *Interzone*, "Pacing the Nightmare," took more writing



time than a story of twice its length, yet it was only 5,000 words. It's mainly a story about karate, but being an instructor I had no research at all on the karate side. I had noticed that the more dedicated students got thinner while gaining weight as they moved up through their belts. They were burning off fat while developing muscle, but I extended the phenomenon so that the main character in the story becomes almost anorexic yet is one of the fittest, strongest, deadliest students in her karate class. I researched some molecular cytology to explain why it might happen, then

I began the first of many many drafts – most of them to get the word count down to half its initial length.

*Was there much of you in that story?*

A bit. A lot of my experience and attitudes in over a decade of karate went into the narrator's voice: I have to push myself to train, I don't meditate much, I have a no-nonsense approach to instruction and examination, and although I'm very fast and have a big reach, I don't hit very hard – I'm no champion, I just do it. Oddly enough I first realized that "Pacing the Nightmare" had really worked the way I wanted it to when a couple of readers complained that the narrator was not as spiritual as a karate instructor ought to be. I thought yes, it's worked! I developed a character, I described a real karate club, I explained the scientific foundations, and I told the story in only 5,000 words. "Pacing the Nightmare" was a turning point in my development as a writer, and I really enjoyed writing it.

*Do you always write to such strict limits?*

My second *Interzone* story, "A Ring of Green Fire," was where I wanted it by 7,000 words. I decided that further pruning would damage it, so I left it alone.

*That story has one of the most memorable first lines in all of science fiction. What inspired it?*

"As I was travelling through Westbury Forest, I met a man with a ring of green fire around his penis." Yes, it does rather draw attention to itself. Back in 1992 the US artist Michael Whelan was visiting Australia with his family, and while he was in Melbourne his son became ill. A friend of mine is a GP, so he came over to my place, diagnosed Michael's son as having an ear infection and gave him a prescription. The Whelan family then flew home, just in time for the LA riots. Meantime I had an idea for a story about a medieval peasant with ears infected by a fluorescent fungus, so that his thoughts seemed to glow with green fire. The idea did not lend itself to a story immediately, however, so I just came back and looked at it every so often.

One night I was watching a wildlife documentary which featured rather graphic footage of a couple of elephants hard at work making baby elephants. Almost without thinking I changed "thoughts glowed with green fire" to the words you are more familiar with. Now a story fell into place at once. I had known a couple of guys in the early 1970s who collected seductions! I later met a couple of their seductees, and they gave me quite an instructive view from the other side. It seems that the guys presented extraordinarily well to the girls when a haze of a bit of alcohol and loud music was present, but in the morning they had about as much personality as an electric toaster. Their lifestyle became the basis for Watkin the Tinker, and the underpinning of the story was the age-old caution against the futility of revenge for its own sake.

*A number of your short stories provided the seed ideas and formed the basis of your novel Voices in the Light. Did you have the larger vision for "Greatwinter" in mind when you wrote those early stories?*

This relates to the seven-year battle that I had to sell *Voices in the Light*. Somewhere around the late 1980s I got so sick of turning out modified versions of *Voices* based on standard advice that I broke it up into a number of short stories with the intention of having the stories published and building a reputation for the novel. Then I could hand it over to a publisher with a pre-established reputation, and this is precisely what happened eventually.

*How did you come up with the concept for the "human" computer which features in your "Greatwinter" novels? It stands out as one of the most ingenious computers in fiction.*

I was working in the State Library of Victoria while doing postgraduate letters in computer science. The place was pretty Dickensian, with rambling rooms filled with folk working on huge piles of books, secret doors, cast-iron spiral staircases and so on. I was reading the *Gormenghast* trilogy when I began work there, and if someone had told me that the State Librarian was Lord Groan I would not have been very surprised. When a reader came along and asked a difficult reference question, a form would be filled out and this would disappear into the innards of the place for a day or two, then reappear with an answer for the person to collect. This struck me as being rather like a vast and cumbersome computer, so I began to sketch out little scenes for a larger work – like a shootout in the main

domed reading room to liberate some of the components. That scene was actually part of the first version of the novel, it was the way that Glasken and Denkar originally escaped the Calculator.

When I left the library and got a job as a programmer the idea of *Libris* and its Calculator stayed with me. I did not attempt to write a full work until 1986, however, because I wanted to at least sell a short story before attempting something as ambitious as a novel. I did, however, write a Fortran program for a mainframe

## Sean McMullen



interviewed by  
Steve Paulsen

computer that modelled the "Calculator's" real processing capabilities. There were already precedents for human-powered computers in sf, but I think I was the first to develop it all the way to a realistic machine with realistic uses, support infrastructure, internal society, etc. An accident at work put me out of action for two months in early 1986 and I had just sold my first sf story, so I decided that this was the time to begin my first novel. The human-computer-in-the-library theme seemed a good one to start with, so *Voices in the Light* began life under the original title of *Greatwinter*.

*Similarly, the concept of "the Call" is quite unique, and it provides a mystery/sense-of-wonder element to the*

*books. Of course the origin of the Call has now been revealed in your short story "The Miocene Arrow." Where did the idea come from?*

From a book on entomology. A long time ago I had read about ants waging wars, keeping slaves and generally doing a lot of pretty suspect things that are generally thought of as humans-only atrocities, and I turned that into "The Miocene Arrow." There is an apocalyptic war between factions of a species of beaked whales back about nine million years ago. Like the ants they have no tools, so they can only fight with natural weapons until a psychic weapon is developed that induces mass strandings among the enemy. Yes, I know Arthur C. Clarke had a similar story involving alien unicorns, but he distracted his aliens from their doomsday weapon by giving them physical tools.

The cetozooids of my works do not have the slightest interest in tools, and they go on to refine their psychic weapon even further. In a later story, "The Eyes of the Green Lancer," the weapon was being applied to humans in the form of a sort of psychic drift-net. This may be a spoiler for "Greatwinter, Book 3," but the Call is being used as a brake on humanity's progress until... nah, that's all I'm going to say. Read the book. One more point that I would add is that a few readers have accused me of abandoning hard science for New-Age mysticism by including the Call. I reject that idea totally.

*Why?*

Consider this (original) story, which can be called, say, "Drift": On a far-away world, long ago, two continents were drifting closer together. On one were the weak and peaceful Fluffies, on the other were the predatory Chompers. Neither species could swim, but they could see each other across the strait between them, and they knew that the gap was narrowing by about an inch per year. The Chompers paced about on their shore, smugly confident that in a few years the water would become shallow enough to wade across, and that raw Fluffy would then be on the menu. The Fluffies were obviously less enthusiastic about the situation. Years passed and one day the first wave of Chompers was finally able to storm across the at low tide – only to be met by a hail of arrows and annihilated. Millennia of worrying about the inevitable invasion of the Chompers had forced the Fluffies to become tool users, and to develop artificial weapons. The very next day the Fluffies began wading across to the Chomper continent and the surviving

Chompers – who only had strong jaws and long teeth for weapons – were heading for the tall timber because they could not fight at a distance. The end.

Now, if I had written "Drift" back in the 1930s, the plate tectonics theory that is its basis would have been considered as fanciful as the Call. I remember that even in the mid 1960s my geography teacher was saying that continental drift was a load of rubbish. Hard sf is all about adding a subtle change to what we already know then making intelligent extrapolations. It's not about exhaustively justifying that subtle change. I rest my case, m'lud.

*Although Voices in the Light and Mirrorsun Rising are firmly based on hard science, to some extent they have a sort of fantasy/medieval feel to them. Is this something that you set out to achieve?*

Well... it just happened. I needed the setting to have a late-medieval/early-Renaissance look and feel, and what we call heroic or high fantasy almost invariably has medieval settings. Naturally some people start reading and think, "hmmm, Conan meets *Neuromancer*."

*One of the strengths of your future Australia is that it is built on a rich tableau. How valuable was your background as an historian in creating your future society?*

Indispensable. History is full of exotic settings, acts of loyalty, treachery, stupidity, bravery and betrayal, and characters so strange that one would think twice about using them in fiction. How about 120 men-at-arms coming to the aid of 300 noble ladies who were besieged by 9,000 armed and dangerous peasants with the most dastardly intentions imaginable – and then routing the peasants completely? A gratuitous malechauvinist wish-fulfilment fantasy from the lurid mind of an over-romantic, monarchist-apologist novelist? Actually it was the Battle of Meaux in France, 1358. Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* describes the incident on pages 179-180, and it's in the *Froisart Chronicles* too. Real life and real history are crammed with the most wonderful, incredible adventures, incidents, places and people, and although I have a pretty lurid imagination anyway I still draw a lot of my material from history because history does it so well.

*You and your wife both have backgrounds as librarians. Are we getting an insight into the real workings and politics of libraries in your "Greatwinter" books?*

That's an easy one. All large, venerable organizations have workings and politics similar to those found in *Libris*. I can think of a dozen places where I have worked that have contributed at least a part of the *Libris* background, and they range from a medical research institute to a Woolworths warehouse. My wife actually contributes nothing in the way of original ideas for my novels – her professional reputation would go up in smoke if her librarian colleagues found themselves in the pages of my books, because a lot of librarians read the "Greatwinter" series. When she has the time she checks over my semi-final drafts as a sample reader, and of course she brings home a lot of books for me and answers my reference questions, but that's all she dares to do.

*A number of the women in your books are very strong characters, in terms of their personalities and leadership qualities. Ruthless, even. How did these characters come about and why did you make them female?*

In former times in Europe, a bright and dynamic woman could only gain political influence either by marrying some powerful oik with a title and an army, or by entering a convent. Convents were often both centres of learning, and in control of considerable wealth and political clout. As an example I refer you to the story of Princess Clotilde, Princess Basina and the long-suffering Abbess Leubovera, in McCall's *The Medieval Underworld*. In France in 589 AD two highborn nuns in the Convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers fell out with the Abbess, and far from displaying their anger by pouting and refusing to get out of bed for matins, the nuns recruited armed gangs and led a series of savage, bloody battles which resulted in many deaths. Move this sort of scenario several thousand years into the future, and we have my idea for librarians running nations under similar circumstances.

While employed in libraries myself I observed quite a few dynamic, talented and intelligent women at work – and I managed to marry two of them (separately) – so I know my subject matter pretty well. You ask why were the principle characters in *Voices in the Light* female? Because it made better sense for them to be female – because it would have been far less credible for them to have been men.

*Humour and sex provide a nice foil to the action, particularly in Mirrorsun Rising. Did you make a conscious effort to do this?*

No. *Voices in the Light* originally had a just as much sex and humour in it,

but it got tinkered with so much for so long while I was trying to sell it, that it came out more reserved. I vary my style to suit the story, and pretty obviously if John Glasken is the central character of any novel, then amorous hanky panky will feature heavily. My unpublished new novel, *The Centurion's Empire*, did not require as much sex and humour, so that's the way I wrote it. Humour and sex do have an important place in realistic fiction because they are a foil to the action in the real world around us. Some people – many of them reviewers, editors and literary authorities – don't like the idea, and they say that the world would be a better place if we were all serious and sensible. I can think of a couple of serious, sensible guys called Adolf and Joe who were running things half a century back and I'd challenge anyone to argue that the world is a better place for their legacy.

One problem for authors is that humour does not win awards. People who vote for awards seem to look at the humour and say "That can't possibly be a good book because it's not serious." It requires a great deal of courage to be funny. Keep a straight face and you're automatically on safe ground. When voting for awards do you vote for books that impress you or books that entertain you? I have heard people call *Mirrorsun* light-hearted compared to *Voices*, yet *Mirrorsun* has far more cruelty, bloodshed and general mayhem than *Voices*. The trouble is that Glasken is the central focus, and who is going to call any book serious that features him as the main character? While civilization crashes down around his ears his priorities are always to stay alive, steal an occasional jar of ale, get a leg over, and fight the forces of darkness if he's cornered.

Actually Glasken is fundamentally a nice guy, even if he is something of a petty crook and could do with a morality transplant. He never rapes or murders, he does none of those things that arsehole anti-heroes do, and the worst that he can be accused of is a bit of tasteless infidelity. Thus he gets branded "unrealistic" and the book is called "not serious." Rubbish! Glasken's real – and no, he's not me.

*When can we expect to see The Miocene Arrow, and will it be the final volume in the series?*

December 1996; and yes. I am working on it at present, and it is shaping up as a rich and exotic book. It is set 20 years after *Mirrorsun Rising*, in the Rocky Mountains of America. The Australians are coming – and John Glasken is one of them. It is written as both a stand-alone book, and as the third in the "Greatwinter" series.

I chose America as the setting because I needed a place that was remote from Australia, with a hi-tech past history, and with a major mountain range some distance from the sea. I intend to leave the series at Volume Three for now.

*You have recently finished writing a new novel, tentatively called The Centurion's Empire, based on your stories "The Deciad" and "Pax Romana." Can you tell me about this, please?*

I'd rather not say too much until it's bought, but it is obviously based on my Roman time traveller Vitellan. For those of you who are impatient, however, there is a third story already published: check out *Aurealis*, December 1993, and you will find "Charon's Anchor." In this one Vitellan has been revived during the Hundred Years War between France and England in 1358, and he has just journeyed across France to the Swiss Alps during the quite ghastly revolt of the French Jacquerie. "Charon's Anchor" marks the end of the second half of the book, then having swapped his human-powered time machine for an automatic one, Vitellan journeys on to 2028. He wakes up as a fugitive under the protection of Lucel Hunter, a female agent and assassin who makes Zarvora and Lemorel look positively wimpy by comparison.

*A recent Eidolon editorial suggested that Aphelion Press might be reducing the number of books it publishes. Do you intend to stay with Aphelion for all your new books?*

Small presses have been hit hard by the huge increase in the price of paper in 1995, so it would not surprise me if Aphelion reduces its output to cut costs. As for staying with Aphelion, Peter McNamara made it quite clear from the start that the company is run primarily to give Australian authors a start to their careers, and that I would be pushed out of the nest after the fourth book. He also said that I could bail out earlier if some big overseas publisher came along and made me an offer too good to refuse. That has not happened as yet. I think that if I can't raise interest with a major publisher after four books from Aphelion, then I should not be in the game anyway. I am Aphelion's second-best selling author after Terry Dowling, so it's not in Peter's financial interest to let me go, but he really is a good man who wants to encourage other new Australian authors – so out I go. I wish that everyone in the sf industry was as generous and supportive as Peter and Mariann McNamara, but sadly that's not the case.

*What are your plans? Do you think that the best Australian sf authors inevitably turn to overseas markets?*

Everyone has a try at the overseas markets at one time or another, but I think that one should aim a work at the market that seems most appropriate for it, rather than worrying about what country that market is based in. Assuming that you include myself among the best Australian sf authors, I'll just strap myself into the rack and we can have a little inquisition into

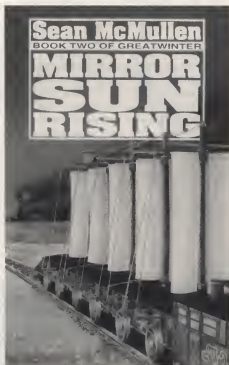
*in Britain. Generally speaking, how are other Australians doing overseas?*

When they manage to sell there, extremely well. Unfortunately only half as many original books by Australians were published overseas in 1991-95 compared to 1981-85. In short fiction the number of stories published by Australians is about the same. The total number of short stories has doubled, however, and the total number of books has quadrupled, meaning that the whole boom in mid-90s Australian sf is due entirely to local publishing. Australians who manage to sell overseas are doing so against dauntingly heavy odds.

*Your novels have mostly received good reviews, but a couple of reviewers have commented that your books could have been improved with stronger editing. What is the editing process at Aphelion and what do you think about comments like these?*

I think that Aphelion's editing is world-class, and few editors even come close to Peter McNamara's standards. I'll go further, and say that I can walk across to my bookshelf and pull down a couple of dozen Hugo and Nebula winners at random, all of which need editing – in my opinion. Past a certain point, editing is only opinion, no more. The Aphelion editing process points out vulnerabilities, and then I fix them my own way. In about 5% of the cases I do exactly what Aphelion suggests, and in another 5% I think they are wrong and change nothing. For the rest I make changes that are better than both the original and the suggestion. It all adds up to quite a workable process. With *Mirrorsun Rising* there were a couple of hundred suggestions (ranging from inserting commas to inserting paragraphs) out of 130,000 words.

*Voices in the Light* had vastly more input from publishers, agents, editors, sample readers and the like in its odyssey from manuscript to bookshelves, but now reviewers and readers say that it is more disjointed than *Mirrorsun*. Why is it more disjointed? Why indeed? Surely not because of all that supposedly informed input by diverse authorities? With a new author there is a temptation to assume that the work is a little raw and sloppy, so when someone writes that the editing could have been better, people nod their heads and assume the worst. Opinions on high-level, creative editing are inherently subjective, and while a first class editor could probably make a bad work passable, that same editor is only going to be able to turn a good work into another sort of good work. A poor editor can actually do real damage.



just how patriotic my own marketing activities appear to be:

Four of my stories that sold overseas were first submitted to Australian markets that rejected them – no, make that three because one magazine folded without rejecting the story. More recently, out of the seven stories that I have had published or accepted in the past three years, only one has gone overseas. All of my books have been published locally. During the past decade I have had over 50 articles published on Australian sf, but only my *Locus* collaborations with Terry Dowling were original publications outside Australia. When the *Eidolon* editors wanted material for their World Wide Web site, I let them use all my fiction and non-fiction previously published in the magazine, so that even my first appearance on the Internet was at an Australian site.

Well now, let's undo the straps. That was not too bad at all; in fact I feel ten feet taller. Would anyone else like a go?

*No thank you, I've just been published*

Back in 1983 I had an editor interested in one of my stories, but he wanted a couple of minor alterations. I did 'em. He wanted more... and nine rewrites later he told me that the story had lost its original magic and he did not want to buy it. Did he know what he was talking about? No way. I later sold an early version of that story to an anthology and it was published as the lead story!

*How do you react to reviews of your work in general?*

With a wath of garlic and a stake through the heart if it's a gratuitously bad or stupid. I've never had a bad review from the top overseas professional magazines, and even in the Australian professional magazines I have done pretty well. I got several quite snaky reviews in fanzines back in the late 1980s, however, and that coloured my attitude to fan reviewers with pretty lurid hues. I generally get my wife to check reviews. If she tells me not to bother, I don't read them. Realistic praise, good one-liners, and good accounts of the plots are obviously welcome, but criticism..... nah, I ignore it. I used to read everything I

that was written about my work, but I found that some reviews were only vindictive, personal attacks that upset me so much that it interfered with my writing. On a couple of occasions I have been forced to read supposedly even-handed reviews of my work, but really, the praise was grudging and the criticisms were based on trivia that amounted to nothing but the reviewer's personal taste.

*Do you find that reviews influence you in any way?*

If a reviewer wants to write a book, great, but I don't tolerate reviewers trying to write my books. Praise does influence me, though. The lecherous but long-suffering John Glasken turned out to be the favourite character of many readers and reviewers (of both sexes) when *Voices in the Light* was published, so when I was casting about for someone to focus upon in *Mirrorsun Rising*, I rejected Ilyire, Darien and Thersela in favour of Glasken. Like I said about editing, any critic can take any book and give it a bad review for reasons ranging from real problems with the book, to a hidden agenda involving literary politics.

to the coffee running out. Who is going to take that sort of thing seriously?

*What plans do you have for the future? What can we expect to see from Sean McMullen?*

In fiction, I'll have *The Miocene Arrow* finished by October for a December or January release. I also have a story in the first-ever Australian heroic fantasy anthology, *Dreamweavers* – edited by Paul Collins and due out later this year. The new *Interzone* anthology will have a reprint of "A Ring of Green Fire." The Roman time-traveller novel, *The Centurion's Empire*, is currently on submission with an overseas publisher. I tried it with an Australian publisher first, but it returned after seven months – unread, according to a secret informant! Apparently they wanted to get in on the current boom in Australian sf but were not sure how to begin. I would have thought that reading a few manuscripts was a pretty sensible starting point, but who am I to say?

*And after that?*

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If you'd rather not cut up your magazine, feel free to photocopy this form, or even write the salient information on a separate sheet of paper.

Kathy Lopez was asleep in her cardboard hut on the bridge between the 24th floors of two buildings protected by the Spiders when she was awakened by the sound of spinning blades. No, she thought, it can't be. She stuck her head through the little flap that served as her door onto the walkway and looked up, but it was hard to see what was happening in the perpetual twilight of the ramps, far below the thick web-like netting that had been draped from roof to roof. Then to her horror, the sunlight broke through. She raised a hand to shield her eyes and saw the net had been sliced in half. Beyond it, dozens of blue and gold helicopters hovered, guns trained on the people below. "Terrorism will not be tolerated. Surrender now," a voice bellowed from a speaker as the choppers began their descent, "and you will be treated fairly."

The bridges swayed wildly from side to side as people ran towards the buildings.

Windows were flung open up and down the towers as Spider soldiers ushered the bridge people in to safety. Then the helicopters opened fire. Several walkways collapsed, plunging homes and businesses and screaming people to the ground. Kathy stumbled along the bridge, wheezing and gasping for breath. She'd just reached a window when the footpath fell away behind her. A Spider soldier caught her by the shoulders and pulled her inside. "You okay, Kath?"

The soldier was a corporal named Raymond and she'd known him all her life. They'd grown up together; he'd been her younger brother's best friend, before her brother, Louie, had been captured and executed. The room she was in was a food store the Spiders maintained for the bridge dwellers. It was filled with row upon row of metal shelves holding bags of flour and stacks of cans. She sank down onto the floor and reached inside her jacket pocket for her inhaler.

"Come on, Kath," Raymond said, kneeling beside her. "You gotta keep moving. Everybody's supposed to head for the basement. We've been in contact with the Cobras; they're gonna open up the tunnel."

She shook her head; she couldn't do it. She'd never make it down all those flights of winding stairs.

"You can't stay here, Kath."

The roar of engines became louder than ever; a helicopter appeared outside the window. Raymond pushed Kathy's head down and leapt to his feet, reaching for his gun. The room had been strafed with gunfire before Raymond could manage a single shot.

Kathy lifted her head to see Raymond lying only inches away from her. His blood was in her hair and on her clothes and she was covered in debris from the shelves; there was spilled food everywhere. Outside the window, the helicopter rose slightly, disappearing from sight. Keeping close to the floor, Kathy slowly began to edge backwards, towards the door. Then she heard someone coming through the window.

"Freeze, terrorist."



## *Molly Brown*

Kathy froze where she was.

"Now stand up."

She lifted her head to see a man in blue and gold armour pointing a very large gun at her with one hand while he unhooked a rope from the harness around his waist with the other. She couldn't see much of the man's face behind his helmet, but she'd know that voice anywhere. No, she told herself, it wasn't possible. She carefully got to her feet, raising her hands in surrender. She was still clutching her inhaler.

"Drop it," the man ordered her.

"It's just —"

"Drop it!"

The inhaler hit the ground.

"Against that wall," the man said. "Now!"

She stood gaping at him, open-mouthed. It wasn't just his voice, it was his mouth, his chin, the way he stood, the way he didn't hold his head quite straight. If only she could see his eyes, then she would know beyond doubt...

"I said move!" the man barked.

"Louie? It is you, isn't it?"

The man raised his gun to her forehead. "Move!"

"Louie, what are you doing? It's me, Kathy, your sister..."

He pulled the trigger.

## One

1

I was working the day shift at Traffic Control when I noticed that someone was making obscene finger shadows on one of my computer screens. I turned around and saw a couple of the guys standing at the back of the room with a flashlight. "Very funny," I said, turning back to the screen. Then a rubber band bounced off my head. I knew who'd done that, and I was determined to ignore it.

Jimmy Rodriguez slid his chair over next to mine. When I still ignored him, he nudged me with his elbow. "Hey, Nora!"

I looked up from my terminal, giving him my iciest stare. I was furious at Jimmy that morning, though it seemed he hadn't figured that out yet.

He pointed to a crack in the left front wall, between two banks of screens displaying a line of nearly stationary cars stretching across most of the 15th sector. That was Angela Greenman's sector, and she was just about tearing her hair out trying to get things moving again. Rather her than me, I thought.

"Is it my imagination," Jimmy said, "or is that crack getting bigger?"

Jimmy had been calling maintenance about that crack for the last two months. And he was right, it was definitely getting bigger. But I wasn't going to tell him that because I wasn't speaking to him. I just shrugged.

I turned back to my own set of screens. I had a bottleneck forming in Valley View Road; I reduced vehicle speed to 20 kph and diverted every second car to an alternate – longer – route. I zoomed in on one particular driver, watching his face contort as he tugged at his steering wheel, trying to pull it the opposite way. It didn't do him any good; I was the one in control and he was taking the scenic route, whether he liked it or not. The man finally let go of the wheel to shake a fist at the camera.

Jimmy laughed and patted me on the back. He loved it when drivers tried to resist, and the more upset they got, the more he loved it. I couldn't blame him for that. The poor guy was stuck monitoring sector nine, the most boring sector you could imagine. Semi-rural. Nothing ever happened in sector nine.

The look on that man's face as he shook his fist at me was so comical I almost started laughing myself. Then I remembered I was supposed to be angry. I bit my lip and stared straight ahead at my screen.

Jimmy got out of his chair and sat down on top of my desk. He bent forward, blocking my view of the terminal. "Nora, is something the matter?"

I shook my head "no".

"So how come the silent treatment?"

"Silent treatment?" I asked innocently.

"You've hardly spoken a word to me all morning."

Hurrah, I thought. He'd finally noticed. "Haven't I? Well maybe I just thought you might be all talked out after your long conversation with Officer Stone last night."

Jimmy's mouth dropped open. "You mean Francie?"

Is that what this is all about?"

"All *what* about? And will you please get off my desk before I punch out all your teeth?"

He switched back to his chair. "Don't be like that, Nora! We were only talking about work."

"So that's why the two of you went off to sit alone in a booth, is it? So you could talk about work?"

"Exactly." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "There's things going on that we're not supposed to know about. Since Francie's moved upstairs, she's overheard some pretty amazing stuff."

"Like what?"

"Apparently there's some big –" Jimmy stopped mid-sentence. "I'll tell you another time," he said, nodding towards something behind me.

I turned and saw a man in the blue and gold torso armour of the Airborne Patrol walk into the room.

Everyone looked up. As far as we were concerned, this guy was one of the *elite*; his uniform had shoulders out to there, and it looked as if he had enough firepower hanging from his hip to blow up an entire block.

The airborne cop took off his helmet, revealing an angular face framed by a tangled mop of curly black hair, and began to move slowly up and down the rows of terminals, as if he was looking for someone or something.

I directed my attention back to the bottleneck in my sector. A truck had started backing into Valley View Road. Great, I thought, just what I do *not* need.

I looked up a minute later and saw the airborne cop looming over the back of my terminal. He looked about 25 – a couple of years younger than me – with large dark eyes and full lips. Dishy. "Can I help you, Officer?" I asked him.

He raised a hand to his forehead, then hurried from the room.

The guy was waiting in Larry's Bar when we got off shift. I didn't recognize him at first, without the blue and gold. He was sitting at the bar, staring straight ahead, a half-empty glass in front of him. Dressed like a typical cop off duty: jeans and a leather jacket, loose-fitting enough to conceal a shoulder holster. He was alone.

I was with about eight or nine others from the office. Other than the airborne cop at the bar, we were the only customers, but it was early yet. Things would pick up later, when the Armoured Vehicle Patrol changed shifts. Then the place would be a madhouse; those guys knew how to party.

"Hey," Jimmy said as we all sat down at our usual table, "isn't that the guy who came nosing around this morning?"

"He wasn't nosing around," I said. "He just took a wrong turn or something."

"He could take a wrong turn with *me* anytime," one of the women said. "Whoever he is, he's absolutely gorgeous."

I agreed with her, just to annoy Jimmy.

"Never seen the guy before," Jimmy muttered, "now we see him twice in one day." He tapped his nose. "He's not from our area, and even if he was, since when do airborne cops come slumming it down in traffic? You

ask me, there's something funny going on."

"Funny like what?" I asked him.

"I don't know. It's just a feeling I have." Then he turned away and started talking to Angela Greenman.

Okay, I thought, two can play at that game. I got up and walked over to the bar, planting myself on the stool next to the airborne cop. I reached into my bag for a handful of credit chips and stacked them in front of me on the bar. "Buy you a drink?"

There was a mirror behind the bar; I could see Jimmy and the others reflected in the glass. Angela was talking to someone else now, but Jimmy still seemed to be making a point of ignoring me. He got up, walked over to the holovid box and pressed some buttons. I sighed in dismay as a woman in a low-cut dress at least two sizes too small for her appeared on a tiny stage at the far end of the room, in full colour 3D. She began squirming and gyrating, her digitalized voice screeching inane lyrics at a decibel level that shook the walls. He had to be kidding; did he really think he was gonna make me jealous with a holovid?

The airborne cop downed the last of his drink in one gulp, grimacing as if he was in pain.

"Are you all right?" I asked him.

"Headache," he said.

I turned to call across the room, "Turn it down a little, will ya?"

Jimmy didn't hear me. He was up on stage with the holovid, doing something that looked like a rain dance.

There was a bowl of nuts on the bar. I popped a handful in my mouth. They were coated in salt, of course. As if the guy who owned Larry's really thought cops needed encouragement to drink.

The airborne cop slid his empty glass across the bar. "My name's Rico Salvo. I work helicopters out of South Central. Does that offer of a drink still hold?"

"Sure."

"Then I'll have a triple Scotch," he said. "Neat."

"Cheap date, aren't you?" I reached into my bag for more credit chips. "Hey, Freddie," I called down to the bartender. "One triple Scotch and one beer."

Freddie poured the drinks, then counted the stack of chips I'd placed on the bar. He took every single one of them.

"Cheers," Rico Salvo said. He gulped down the contents of his glass, then swivelled around to face me, his head tilted slightly to one side. "Do I seem drunk to you?"

"No."

He sighed. "I didn't think I was. Though it's not for want of trying." He pointed to the glass he'd just emptied. "I've had four of those within the last hour, all triples, but nothing seems to work."

"Really?" I said. I could still taste those salty nuts. I took a long drink, swirling the beer around my tongue before I swallowed. "And I came over here thinking I would drink you under the table."

"How long you been working traffic?"

"Forever."

"And how long's forever?"

"Six years."

"Six years?" he repeated, his eyes widening slightly.

"Well, almost. My anniversary is next week. Depressing, isn't it? All that time I spent in the academy, all that riot training and target shooting and unarmed combat, and where do they send me on graduation? To an office where I do nothing but sit on my butt all day, staring at a bank of screens. What kind of work is that for a cop, I ask you?"

"But you weren't always working Northwest, were you? You used to work in another area and got transferred here within the last couple of months, right?"

"No. I've always worked Northwest."

He looked back at the table where the others were sitting. "And what about them? How long have they been working traffic here?"

"Most of them were already around when I started." I shrugged. "We've all been here for years."

The guy practically turned green.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He stood to leave. "Thanks for the drink."

"Hey, wait," I said. "I buy you a triple Scotch and you don't even ask me my name?"

"All right, what's your name?"

"Nora. Nora Kelly."

"Thanks for the drink, Nora Kelly."

He walked out the door without looking back.

Freddie came over to clear away the glasses. He gave me a sympathetic look, then poured me a beer on the house. "Forget him, sweetie. He wasn't your type anyway."

"So who is?" I asked him.

He nodded towards the stage. "You know that better than me, honey."

The holovid came to an abrupt end, leaving Jimmy alone on the little platform, his lips puckered into a kiss. "Ah, hell," he said, stepping down to put more chips in the machine. Then he saw I was alone. He crossed over to lean against the bar. "Well?"

"Well what?"

He rolled his eyes. "What did you and that guy find to talk about? Was it love at first sight?"

I shrugged. "What's it matter to you?"

"Oh please don't be like that, baby." He gave me one of his little boy lost looks. "You know how I feel about you, so how come you always wanna fight about everything, huh?"

I could never resist him when he looked at me like that. "Let's get outta here," I said.

Next morning at work, all anyone could talk about was the news that a cop bar in Northeast had been bombed the previous night. The local branch of the Spiders had claimed responsibility, saying it was in retaliation for a police raid in South Central, which they referred to as "an unjustified massacre of the



poor and homeless". The death toll so far was in the 30s, but expected to rise to at least 50, which would bring the number of police killed so far that year to nearly 400.

There was a jam building up in my sector. I started to divert a couple of trucks, and then I stood up.

"Something the matter, babe?" Jimmy asked me.

There was something the matter, all right. My father and my brother had both been killed by the terror gangs, and this latest atrocity by the Spiders had brought it all back. I hadn't become a cop so I could sit in a basement monitoring traffic while terrorist scum were getting away with murder. "Cover for me, will you?"

I went upstairs to the personnel office and demanded a transfer to patrol. "I don't belong behind a desk," I told them. "I should be out there on the streets, where I'm needed."

"Sit down, Officer Kelly," the woman behind the desk said, "and let's have a little talk."

## Two

2 I was ordered to report to a room at East Central Headquarters, where a woman in a Captain's uniform asked a couple of routine questions before telling me that I was being assigned to Armoured Vehicle Patrol in the 17th sector.

Vehicle patrol! I couldn't wait to tell Jimmy.

The captain pressed a button on her desk. "Send Kopalski in."

There was a knock at the door, then a tall man entered, wearing the blue and white torso armour of a vehicle cop, his helmet tucked beneath one arm. He was in his late 20s or early 30s, with pale blonde hair, cut very short. His face was round and boyish, and his eyes were the brightest shade of blue I'd ever seen.

"Officer Kopalski," the Captain said, "this is Officer Kelly. I'm assigning her to be your partner."

Kopalski grabbed hold of my hand and shook it up and down. "Nice to meet you, partner."

"Officer Kopalski," I said, wincing. The guy had quite a grip. I pulled my hand away and turned to face the Captain. "When do I start?"

"Tonight. Report to sub-station four at 2100 hours."

"But I left all my stuff —"

"That's all been taken care of," the Captain interrupted. "Your possessions should be en route to your new quarters within the hour." She reached into a desk drawer and handed me a key. "Accommodation Block B. It's just around the corner."

The elation I'd felt a few moments earlier had vanished. Everything was happening so fast. I'd thought I'd have at least a couple of days to arrange everything. I'd thought I'd be able to spend some time with Jimmy and say goodbye to all my friends and maybe have a big farewell bash at Larry's, and now it looked like I wasn't going to do any of those things.

And I didn't like the thought of strangers in my room, going through all my things.

I dumped four heavy bags on the lobby floor of Accommodation Block B and held my I.D. out to the clerk behind the desk. "Ah yes, Kelly," he said, checking the name against a list on his computer. "Been shopping, have you?"

I turned the key in the door of my new quarters on the 31st floor and switched on the lights. Not only had my possessions been delivered in my absence; they'd been unpacked. I blinked several times, shaking my head in disbelief. Everything was exactly the same, the same standard furnishings, the same light blue paper on the walls. I could have been back in my room at Northwest Area, if it wasn't for the fact that this place was so much cleaner.

But that won't last long, I thought, flopping onto the bed. I rolled onto my side was asleep within seconds.

*Officer James Rodriguez  
Room 1728  
Accommodation Block A  
Northwest Area*

*Dear Jimmy,*

*I must have written you at least a dozen times over the last two months, so how come I haven't heard anything back from you?*

*Everything's okay this end, though I miss you and the rest of the old traffic gang something terrible. None of them have written to me either. What the hell's going on, huh?*

*Bruce (I told you about him, he's my partner) and I get along just fine, but — this is going to sound corny — he just isn't you. Goofy, huh? I can almost hear you laughing over the net.*

*Please Jimmy, please please write back.*

*Nora*

I re-read the letter I'd typed on my bedside screen before I pressed the key to mail it. I'd tried to keep it short and light this time; my last couple of letters had sounded kind of desperate. But was I supposed to do? This not hearing anything was driving me crazy.

I got up and made a cup of coffee.

A couple of hours later, I opened a bottle of Scotch. Jimmy still hadn't written back.

Kopalski knocked on my door a little after eight. He lived a couple of floors above me, and we'd got into the habit of leaving for parade together. But this was our night off.

I opened the door, holding the Scotch bottle in one hand. It was only half empty; I still had some way to go. "What do you want, Kopalski?"

"Looks like I've come at a bad time," he said, eyeing the bottle.

"You think there's any such thing as a good time?" I stepped aside to let him pass. "Come on in."

He sat down at my kitchenette counter. "You okay, Nora?"

"I'm fine."

"It's just... you seem upset."

I took a long swig from the bottle. "Do I?"

"Maybe it's none of my business..."

"It isn't."

"But as your partner... and I hope... your friend..." He sighed and shook his head. "Drinking alone out of a bottle is not what I'd call a good sign."

"Kopalski, what I do on my night off in my own room is my own damn business, okay? And for the record, it doesn't affect me." I held out my hand to show him. "See? Steady as a rock. I could drink five gallons of this stuff, it wouldn't be any different."

"Sounds like an even worse sign," he said.

"What do you want, Kopalski? Just tell me what you want, okay? And then you can piss off outta here and leave me alone!"

He stood up. "I'm going."

Damn, I thought, why am I doing this? We got along fine when we were on duty. I *liked* the guy. I put down the bottle and spread my arms to block his way. "Look, I didn't mean that, okay? Sit back down, I'll make us some coffee."

He nodded and sat down.

I went around behind the counter and started heating up some water. "So what brings you knocking on my door tonight, Bruce?" I asked him, keeping my voice light and casual so he'd know we were still friends. "Don't usually see you on a night off."

"I knocked on your door because I wondered if you might like to go out for a pizza or something," he said, looking away.

"Go out with you?" This wasn't the same as going for a drink at the end of a shift; I wondered what he was getting at. "Why?"

"No reason," he said. "It's just that it's my birthday, and I felt like maybe going out or something and I wondered if you'd like to come." He threw up his hands. "Just forget it, okay? I'm sorry I bothered you." He stood and started walking towards the door.

I glanced at the blank screen of my bedside computer. Jimmy would have been off shift for hours now. I knew he wasn't going to write back. Not ever. "Wait," I said.

Kopalski kept walking.

"Bruce!"

He stopped and turned around.

"Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday? I woulda got you a present or something."

"Oh yeah?" His cheeks turned pink. "What would have got me?"

"Something cheap." I reached for my coat. "So where you wanna go?"

A week later we were called to a disturbance near the Heights, a housing estate the locals referred to as "the Fortress" because its hilltop location had made it a stronghold for the East Central branch of the Spiders. Cops never went into the Fortress, but this was just a domestic tiff in the no man's land on the outskirts near the bottom of the hill, too easily accessi-

ble from outside to be much use to the terror gangs.

It was my turn to do the driving. The sun was setting as the car approached the hill. I couldn't resist the urge to gaze up at the high dark towers of the Fortress set against a glowing red sky. While other terror gangs like the Cobras and the Blades had moved their operations to underground tunnels, the Spiders had taken to the air. They were famous for the huge nets they draped across their roofs and their networks of suspended walkways. They said there were people in the Fortress whose feet had never touched the ground. The Fortress represented everything I hated, everything I was sworn to fight against – but at that moment I couldn't stop thinking that those tall black silhouettes also had a kind of strange, almost thrilling, beauty. I noticed that Bruce was looking up at them too, and I couldn't help smiling.

A group of children appeared out of nowhere and started pelting the car with rocks. I gritted my teeth and kept driving; children with rocks were just one of those things you got used to on vehicle patrol.

The address we'd been given turned out to be a converted garage at the end of an alley. I stepped on the brakes, rolled down the window and listened. "No sound of breaking glass, no yelling. Maybe they've already kissed and made up."

"Let's hope so," Bruce said.

We got out of the car and walked towards the door. I reached up to ring the bell and a window above my head flew open. There was a sound like an explosion. Bruce toppled forward, clutching at his chest. "Officer down!" I shouted into my radio. "We need help! Now!"

There were more shots from overhead. Spirallers: those spinning rocket-type bullets with a tail of flaming propellant that can burn a hole through nearly two inches of solid steel. This was no domestic call; this was an ambush. I crouched down with my drawn weapon in one hand, trying to shield Bruce's body while I dragged him back to the car. "Don't die on me, damn you," I warned him. "Don't even think about it."

A spiraller spun past my head, melting a hole in the side of my helmet. I fired several times into the window the shots were coming from. There was a moment's silence, then a spiraller grazed my arm, scorching the sleeve of my jacket. Another grazed my leg.

I kept tugging at Bruce with my one free arm until I managed to get him around the back of the car. I fired over and over at that upstairs window, tears streaming down my face. Bruce wasn't moving.

Suddenly the air was filled with the hum of spinning blades. There was a loud burst of gunfire, then a figure in blue and gold slid down a rope, landing directly behind me. I turned to see a woman holding a hypodermic needle. "Just relax," she told me, "you'll feel better if you just relax."



## Three

3

I woke up in some kind of clinic, with an acrid smell of disinfectant in my nostrils and a terrible chemical taste in my mouth.

A man in a white coat stood at the foot of my bed. "What's your name?" he asked me.

I had to think about that. I noticed a jug by the side of the bed and sat up to pour myself a glass of water. "Kelly," I said finally. "Nora Kelly."

"And what do you do for a living?"

That was easy. "I'm a police officer."

"Do you remember anything else?"

I suddenly became aware of a throbbing pain behind my forehead. "My father worked Armoured Vehicle Patrol in West Central," I said, reaching up to rub my temples. "He was killed on duty when I was just a kid. I entered the academy the year my brother was shot."

The man shone a narrow beam of light into one of my eyes, which made the pain in my head even worse. "Then what?"

I raised a hand to block the light. "Six years of boredom in Traffic Control. What am I doing here?"

"You had a little accident, but you're all right now. Good to have you back with us, Officer Kelly," the man said.

I was assigned to a small station in the 17th sector at Southeast, which immediately erupted into full-scale war between us and an alliance of the Cobras and the Blades. I remember the next few months as a blur of shootings and bombings. The fourth time I was wounded, they gave me a medal. And then they told me to get myself a set of blue and gold because I was being transferred to airborne.

I had to go back to Northwest Area, one last time. I had to show them.

I went down to the basement and found myself in a room full of strangers. A man looked up from his terminal. "May I help you, Officer?"

"I'm looking for someone," I said. "Do you know an Officer James Rodriguez?"

He shook his head.

I started to wonder if I was in the wrong room. Then I saw the jagged stripe of mismatched plaster where someone had finally filled in that crack Jimmy always used to complain about. I mentioned some other names of people I had worked with.

"Try personnel, on the second floor."

"I'll do that," I said. "By the way, how long have you been working Northwest Traffic?"

"About eight years."

"Eight years? Here? In this room?"

He laughed. "Sad, isn't it?"

I went across the street to Larry's Bar, but it wasn't there. A squat prefab stood in its place. A sign above the door read: "Colette's Lounge."

I went inside. No one in Colette's had ever heard of Jimmy Rodriguez.

They hadn't heard of him at his old accommodation block, either.

I spent the long drive home trying to make sense of it all, but I couldn't.

I got off the elevator at the 29th floor and opened the door to my quarters. Though the room was dark, I couldn't miss the outline of that familiar figure standing in the shadows beside my window. "Jimmy!"

I raced across the room and threw my arms around him, words pouring out of my mouth in a rush. "Jimmy, for God's sake where have you been? Why didn't you write? And what are you doing here? Oh God, it's so good to see you!"

He pushed me away and switched on the lights. When I saw his face, I was horrified. There were deep lines around his eyes and mouth and his hair was streaked with silver. He looked like an old man. "Jimmy, what happened to you?"

"Hand over your weapon, Officer."

It was then I noticed he was wearing a Captain's badge. "When did you make Captain?"

"I said hand over your weapon, Officer! Now!"

"Okay, Jimmy." I handed him my gun. "What's going on?"

"You've been breaking regulations, Officer. Leaving your own area without permission is strictly prohibited, even the greenest rookie knows that. But you went to Northwest today, didn't you?"

"I only went to see you, you jerk," I said, playfully punching him on the shoulder.

He batted my hand away as if he couldn't stand the thought of me touching him. "Don't do that again."

"Jimmy, why are you acting this way? This is me you're talking to! Me, Nora. Remember?"

"Don't you dare," he hissed. "Don't you dare!"

My eyes filled with tears. "Jimmy, please. This isn't like you..."

He slapped me across the face, hard. "Shut up, you murdering terrorist scum!"

"What?" I croaked. The tears were rolling down my cheeks now; I couldn't stop them.

"Scum, that's all you are. You used to make bombs for the Spiders in a tower in North Central. But you don't remember that, do you, Officer?"

I cursed myself for giving up my weapon. Jimmy had gone crazy. I took a step backwards and found I was up against the wall. "Jimmy, you need help..."

"Don't move," he said, pointing my own gun at me. "You really think you're Nora, don't you? But then so did all the others; you must be the fifth or sixth by now. I remember the second one used to bombard me with letters, the stupid bitch. But you're the first to actually come looking for me."

"Jimmy," I said, keeping an eye on the gun, "you're not making sense."

"Aren't I? Then let me explain. Officer Nora Kelly agreed to take part in an experiment..."

"I remember that," I interrupted. "I went up to personnel to demand a transfer and they asked me if I would be willing to take part in some new programme, then they sent me to some doctor for a physical, but all he did was some kind of brain scan or something..."

He scowled, then carried on. "Nora Kelly's memory was downloaded into a computer. Everything she'd ever learned, done, seen or felt."

I didn't remember that part.

"She died in a terrorist blast at Larry's Bar seven months later. That was 20 years ago, and they've been making new Noras ever since. She's just one of hundreds we re-use every three or four years."

"What?"

"What other choice did we have? Fatality rates for police were at an all time high; and thanks to the anti-police propaganda being spread by Spiders and the other terror gangs, recruitment had never been so low. So we started taking convicted criminals and terrorists who'd been sentenced to death, wiped out their previous identity and programmed them with the memories and personalities of dead cops, then sent them into the most dangerous sectors. They were disposable, like cannon fodder. It didn't matter if they got killed on duty – matter of fact, that's what was supposed to happen. Rather than putting them on the chair or giving them a lethal injection, the courts gave us approval to make some use of them before they died. Of course it's always been very hush hush; it's hardly the sort of thing you make public. But I'd say at least half the force at any time – on patrol, that is, not on desk jobs – are convicted criminals doing community service."

I thought back to that long ago evening in Larry's Bar; it seemed like yesterday. "I remember an airborne cop came into the room while we were working at Northwest Traffic. He seemed confused, like he was looking for someone... Like I felt today, looking for you. I remember I bought him a drink that night, while you were dancing with some holovid. He was so sad... He said his name was Rico Salvo. Was he...?"

Jimmy finished the question for me. "Another ex-Spider with implanted memories of working at Northwest Traffic?"

I nodded.

"His real name was Louie Lopez, and he couldn't follow regulations, either," Jimmy said. "Though in his case, what happened wasn't really his fault. It seems some idiot in dispatch screwed up and assigned the guy to South Central, which happened to be his home area and I guess somebody there recognized him, which completely blew his programming. Assignments are supposed to be carefully orchestrated; no one is ever stationed any place where they might encounter past associates. And that includes other cops who might have known an earlier version of the implanted personality. But whether Lopez was the victim of an administrative fuck-up or not was not the issue. Insubordination was the issue: it's the one thing we cannot and will not tolerate." He sighed. "His original sentence was carried out the next day."

I felt my eyes widen. "You can't mean what I think you mean..."

"Don't look so upset. You never even met the guy. You only remember that particular incident because it happened to the real Nora before her memories were downloaded, and we still haven't figured out how to

edit the damn things." He sat down on my bed, keeping the gun pointed at me the whole time. "How about a guy named Bruce Kopalski? Remember him?"

I shook my head.

"Of course you don't. No more than the current Kopalski remembers a woman named Nora Kelly. Though word is that once upon a time, those two became quite friendly, if you catch my drift." He picked up the empty bottle I'd left on the bedside table. "This was despite the fact the third Kopalski was more than a little concerned about the second Nora's drinking." He laughed. "The original Nora liked a drink now and then, but she could never handle her liquor. The times I had to carry her home from Larry's..."

"Doesn't affect *you* though, does it? And drugs don't do anything for you guys, either... There's always stuff it's better not to leave to chance." He dropped the bottle, letting it crash into pieces at his feet. "Your name used to be Martina Wiley, by the way. Just in case you were wondering..."

He clicked back the hammer on my gun.

"Jimmy, please don't do this. No matter what you say, I know what I remember and the one thing I can't forget is that I've always loved you."

His face softened briefly. "I doubt it's any consolation, but after you there won't be any more Nora Kellys. She wasn't a bad cop, but she was too emotional. This isn't the first time a Nora's caused problems."

I brought one leg up in a sweeping kick, knocking the gun from Jimmy's hand. As he bent forward to pick it up, I brought a hand down on the back of his neck; I heard it crack.

He crumpled onto the floor. I knelt down beside him, cradling his head in my arms. "Oh Jimmy, Jimmy, why?"

My world was falling apart. Jimmy, my best and only friend, the man I loved more than I'd ever loved anyone, had tried to murder me.

He wasn't breathing.

"No," I sobbed, rocking his head like a baby. "Don't be dead. Don't leave me!"

Something fell out of his jacket. I picked it up and saw a faded photo of a redheaded woman, with large green eyes and a round face dotted with freckles. Written across it were the words: To Jimmy, love forever, Nora.

She wasn't me.

I heard the sound of running feet out in the hall. I reached for my gun and stood, letting Jimmy's head drop to the floor. Someone pounded on my door, and then they tried to kick it in.

I climbed out on the window ledge and started making my way around the outside of the building. I seemed to have a head for heights.

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**Molly Brown** has written many popular stories for *Interzone*, from the funny "Bad Timing" (issue 54) to the grim "Feeding Julie" (issue 100). She lives in Surrey. Her most recent novel, *Invitation to a Funeral*, a historical whodunnit, was published by Gollancz in November 1995.

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

**B**ob Shaw's death in February cast a gloom over the worldwide sf community, as reported in David Pringle's brief obituary last issue. Let me add that Bob was one of those rare people in whom sf's professional and fan circles intersect – who hold the thing together and make it still possible to call it a community. The outrageous, pun-strewn comedy performances which Bob called "serious scientific talks" would unite all the disparate groups at sf conventions, as the bars emptied and everyone crowded to hear him. (Some never realized that writing those talks was seriously hard work; many conventions blithely took it for granted that he'd oblige once again.) He was universally loved. Losing Bob Shaw really hurts.

## THE COTTAGE OF ETERNITY

**Forrest J. Ackerman** (who likes to remind us that he received the first Hugo ever presented, as "1st Fan Personality" in 1953) has resigned his editorial position with *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, which he founded in 1958. This followed disputes with the current publisher Ray Ferry, who allegedly spiked FJA's articles, slashed his fees and then left him unpaid for a year. The cruellest cut is Ferry's appropriation of FJA's long-running pseudonym Dracula, invented "about the time Ferry was born"....

**Iain M. Banks**, it is rumoured, plans a major image overhaul with the reissue of his sf novels under the impenetrable pseudonym "Iain Banks" already used for mainstream fiction.

**Ellen Datlow** assures us all that *Omni* continues to be strong and vital despite the axing of its print edition even as the April issue was being put together. Circumventing rising paper prices, the whole operation has moved into cyberspace on the World Wide Web.

**John Grant** follows Iain Banks in making *nom-de-plume* history, reverting to his real name Paul Barnett for a coming space opera series – in hope of foxing the mighty W. H. Smith computers which may have recorded that John Grant's *The World* didn't sell too well (being, for one thing, released in mid-December).

**Stephen Marley** knows how to write a letter accepting a story of Lovecraftian pastiche (one of several to be adapted as a CDi game): "I read it, first with unease, then a creeping sense of dread, and finally a black, clutching horror until I was reduced to a gibbering idiot mouthing primordial gobbledygook." Similar symptoms, I am told, are reliably generated by the *Interzone* slushpile.

**Paul J. McAuley**, desperate to get himself a plug, reports that despite Gollancz's careful placement of "SF" on the spine, numberless hordes of readers have bought his world-famous novel *Fairyland* and complained bitterly about its not being fantasy. The paperback may feature a gold embossed warning: THIS IS NOT A FANTASY NOVEL ABOUT INNER CITY CYBERPIXIES OR SPACESHIPS POWERED BY TELEPATHIC WIZARDS. (*Publicity Person*: "Hey, can't we lose that NOT?")

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Nebula Awards.** The novel shortlist comprises: John Barnes, *Mother of Storms*; Nancy Kress, *Beggars and Choosers*; Paul Park, *Coelestin*; Robert J. Sawyer, *Hobson's Choice aka The Terminal Experiment*; Walter Jon Williams, *Metropolitan*; Gene Wolfe, *Caldé of the Long Sun*. Also our very own Brian Stableford features on the novella shortlist for "Mortimer Gray's History of Death" (*Asimov's*, April 95).

**Really Old News.** Once upon a time in 1922, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle exacted a gentle revenge for the deserved mockery he'd received from Houdini and other magicians after his endorsement of the faked "Cottinley Fairies" pictures. He confronted the Society of American Magicians in New York with what he gaily called materialized pictures emanating from the human imagination: movie scenes of dinosaurs which to Houdini & Co. (and the *New York Times*) seemed bafflingly, mindbogglingly lifelike. Only next day did Conan Doyle reveal that what they'd assumed was being offered as "spirit photography" was in fact test special-effects footage for a certain forthcoming film called *The Lost World* (1925)....

**Bob Shaw Speeches.** Although their mere words are much lessened when not delivered in Bob's mournful

Irish accent, most of those celebrated convention speeches are in print as *A Load of Old BoSh* from Becon Publications, 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex, RM3 0RG... £5.50 (or \$10.00) post free, all profits to RNIB Talking Books.

**Maison d'Ailleurs:** this unique museum of sf in Switzerland, threatened by a 70% cut in local council funding, received a stay of execution pending further debate – thanks, in part, to 7,026 signatures on a worldwide petition of protest.

**Fortean Phenomena.** More worrying than a rain of blood or frogs is this communication from *Fortean Times*, which with its April 1996 switch to monthly publication is reduced to accepting articles from me: "It may or may not amuse you to know that Etienne, our trusty Art Director, spent the best part of a day 'making this Langford guy's hair look normal' before giving up in disgust. The man whose hair was too spooky for *Fortean Times*... a rare accolade, that." H'm'm!

**R.I.P.** Other figures of note who died in February include Shamus Culhane (1908-1996), a pioneer of movie animation who was responsible for Disney's 1937 *Snow White*; Brian Daley (1947-1996), a US writer whose debut was the science-fiction *The Doomfarers of Coramonde* (1977) but who became best known for tie-in novels based on *Star Wars*, *Tron*, etc; Sam Merwin Jr (1910-1996), once editor of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, etc; and Elsie Wollheim (1910-1996), widow of the late Donald A. Wollheim of DAW Books fame, who was to be an honoured guest at the coming World SF Convention in Los Angeles.

**Pulphouse Publishing (USA)** is closing down. *Pulphouse* magazine is dead and scheduled books like *Ellison Under Glass* will not appear... because editor and publisher Dean Wesley Smith wants to get back to full-time writing and – since "in five years I will be of age to try the Seniors Professional Golf Tour" – golfing.

**Thog's Masterclass** offers a golden oldie: "She did not appear to be wearing perfume, yet there was a fragrance in the car that hadn't been there before. It made him think of new mown hay or a freshly scrubbed diary. It reminded him of violets and primroses, hiding under leaves. She made him think of amaranth and brambles, of burdock and clover, of dewberry and flax. Yet there was a strangeness about her wild freedom. She also made him think of wood anemones and enchanter's nightshade." ("Lee Barton," aka Lionel Fanthorpe, *The Shadow Man*, 1966)

What do kids really want? What do their parents want them to want? What do the purveyors of desire want them to want them to want, and how do they get them to buy it? From such tangled skeins is woven the enigma of befuddled dreams we know as the "family" movie, and *Jumanji* is one of the most fascinatingly confused in years.

*Jumanji* is adapted from a pleasantly strange Chris Van Allsburg picture-book – an unusual and adventurous choice of source – and certainly doesn't seem to have had an easy time fleshing its surreal, elliptical story into something resembling a conventional movie narrative. At first glance, the mapping of the plot on to a fantasy boardgame actually holds out enormous promise for a stripped-down, ruthlessly functional film structure, since spectacle movies are arguably more like boardgames than

anything else – with their limited cast of players, their strict yet arbitrary rules dictating how the pieces can move, and their tightly-defined competitive goals setting up the big endgame and final resolution. And the setup sounds great: just three rules ("the first player to reach the end wins; doubles get another turn," and "it'll all go away if someone finishes"), with a new set piece emerging on each roll of the dice. What's more, and particularly attractive for an effects-driven movie, is that the set pieces are *cumulative* rather than serial – each new oddity continuing to hang around and menace our heroes until the final roll, generating a scenario of escalating bizzarerie and mayhem.

Sadly, somewhere in the course of what seems to have been an uncomfortable genesis, *Jumanji* has fatally lost faith in its own oddness. A more-than-usually packaged, authorless movie, *Jumanji* gives the impression of having been haunted by some out-of-sync producer who's stalked around the lot demanding more and yet more motivation in the rewrites, until what should have been a uniquely tight, speedy plot formula has got laboriously padded out with extended routines of self-examination and reaction. This woeful attempt to make conventional sense of what should have been left as nonsense cripples the pace and further weakens what exiguous logic the storyline has, given that the set

## MUTANT POPCORN



NICK LOWE

pieces are completely arbitrary and there's no obvious reason why they can't just pass the dice round fast and get the game over with before most of the jungle jeopardy can catch up with them. Scenes that ought to be perfunctorily swift take all day; and the multiple prologues compound the sense of a film that takes forever to go anywhere. A bit like *The Indian in the Cupboard*, *Jumanji*'s strange brand of fantasy premise belongs to a different genre of narrative altogether; and someone in power who evidently hasn't got it at all seems to

Left: Jonathan Hyde is the big game hunter Van Pelt who escapes from the game of *Jumanji* being played, below left, by Sarah (Bonni Hunt), Judy (Kirsten Dunst) and Peter (Bradley Pierce). Below right, Sarah clings to Alan (Robin Williams) as vines take over the house.



have worked overtime at filling in unpluggable gaps in the logic with trowel-loads of gummy, half-congealed gloop.

But then, *Jumanji* is designed ground-up as a Christmas movie. (One of the amusements of living on the old side of the planet is that the seasons take several months to arrive from Hollywood, and Christmas is smeared out between November and Easter.) It's for kids; it's about a *boardgame*; it's got Robin Williams, on reasonably calming medication for once; but way above all, it's about bringing families together, death and orphanhood no impediment, with a breathsnatchingly shameless finale that not only reconstitutes all the various deceased parents in a glorious Hallelujah resurrection, but undoes three generations of dysfunctionality to unite all the re-bonded survivors in one big mother of all Christmas parties. There's a darker film running in the background about the decline of the Southern economy and the collapse of manufacturing industry into a tense, resentful human landscape of poverty-trapped unemployment, a world on welfare easily ignited into anarchy and looting when the jungle comes to the local Sir Save-a-Lot. But even that is fast-rewound by the ending and taped over with a new feelgood narrative of universal harmony and prosperity through the magic of styled sports footwear. The creepy thing about *Jumanji* (aside from watching Kirsten Dunst play a normal child, which is quite unsettling enough) is that the real rules of the game are ideological: "if you're afraid of something you've got to stand and face it"; hug today and save on therapist bills tomorrow; and the family that plays together, stays together. Pity the kid who gets this for a Christmas message when what they really wanted was a pet dinosaur.

Luckily, there's one in the other stocking, with a tartan hat and a tag marked "A Gifftie frae the Glens." On the face of it, *Loch Ness* is a film about heritage: about the compromises to history, environment, culture and national consciousness forced on the British by the economic necessity of pimping themselves to transient customers from Pacific-rim nations with galling excesses of money. Ted Danson (who else?) is America: male, middle-aged, cynical, overpaid, oversexed, and over the water on a seven-day excursion to have his pleasure of us in return for some guzzling financial exploitation. Joely Richardson, for the home team, is alluringly youthful by comparison, yet to the romantic eye infinitely older in spirit, with geographic roots and a trans-generational family heritage stretch-

ing back to the time of legends, but sadly impoverished and in dire need of doing some accommodating to bring up her single-parented wain and give her history a future.

But that, of course, is just the bumps above the waterline. It doesn't take a shipload of detection equipment to see that what it's deep-down really about is the British film industry. Richardson and her fine support team stand for Working Title and the rest of her underinvested little village, desperate to find a way of "accommodating" (a key word) US production and audiences with the minimum loss of virtue and reputation. And from "Los Angeles - California," Danson is the big, big money from over the sea, lured by the rumour that *Jurassic Park* is alive and open for business in a godforsaken watershed in Highland Region, whose healing waves can mend midlife crisis and restore financial credibility.

What surfaces from these cloudy depths is a film of fascinating, undisguised compromises. Disarmingly, *Loch Ness* starts where other British attempts to doll themselves up for a Hollywood trick merely end up: with a completely shameless Hollywood narrative template of self-discovery and familial renuculation along a classical three-act curve of choices and commitments, culminating in a rapture of revelation before a dodgy bluescreen where the timeless bond of child and dinosaur anneals all human damage. The landscapes and community are painted in misty heritage colours, with local characters telling tall tales over pints of heavy to live fiddle & accordion playing *Over the Tollbridge to Skye* - a quite spookily apt theme under the circumstances, capped only by the choice of *Wild Mountain Thyme* [for foreign readers only: the Scottish Tourist Board's chosen advertising anthem] to score the ending. I hope the McPeakes have been able to afford a nice little Range Rover on the proceeds.

But then the movie goes and does to its backers exactly what its villagers do to Danson: seduce, fleece and confound the meddling Californian, leaving him with a product that looks fantastic on paper but turns out to be completely unsaleable. Tellingly, Danson's own fatal mistake - as tourist, scientist and Local Hero alike - is to try to get Nessie on camera. As the film itself is scrupulous to make clear, the dinosaurs themselves - notice, by the way, how effortlessly it's presumed that the mystery in the loch is a dinosaur - are more interesting for *not* being seen, and are certainly the least attractive thing in the film, in part because they're one of the few elements untouched by a distinctly unHollywoody irony and

ambivalence. Desperately, most of the dino footage has ended up front-windowed in the trailer, but to no evident avail.

For the message of *Loch Ness* is that its tensions, both crypto-zoological and intercultural, are irresolvable and even necessary: what matters isn't the Beastie, but the *mystery*. "You and your puny machines," Ian Holm's oddly-cast water bailiff (*water bailiff?*) tells Danson in a line even he can't do much to redeem, "will never destroy 1400 years of mystery!" The wave function will collapse once the box is opened, and either there is a dinosaur in the loch or there isn't. If there is, theme-park capitalism moves in completely, and the war between science and conservation opens a new front; if there isn't, the romance and the tourists both go away and the community fades into rain-sodden oblivion. The only solution available to the movie is, needless to say, the full-frontal copout of sneaking a peek into the box, then locking it tight to leave all the tensions deliberately unresolved.

Now this, by the film's argument, constitutes a happy ending, leading to a transatlantic embrace and the reconstitution of an iconic nuclear family out of the loose lives and incomplete relationships divided by the asymmetry of power and desire between the new world and the old. After all, the magic and the mystery are left carefully intact, an invitation to other Dansons to find themselves, heal their disillusion, and get their own leg over with a lusty highland landlady on a seven-day break to Jurassic World Drumdrachit. But perhaps Danson's real mistake is that, despatched to blow open "the biggest hoax in history," he settles for merely going after Nessie - rather than the more egregious fantasy that sodding awful weather is romantic and picturesque, and that there is a "real" Scotland accessible to visitors prepared to look beyond the tourist hotel, ceilidhs, shortbread and tartan wallpaper, and to tuck instead into a welcoming plateful of haggis, neeps and mash with a wee glass of white wine. For the home market, *Loch Ness* is arguably a more challenging film than (let's for mischief's sake say) *Trainspotting*, in that it attempts to confront present-day urban Scots, emerging from their cinematic *annus mirabilis* with a fresh and cheekier sense of national cool, with their old, still-unresolved ambivalence to the traditional, sentimental, tourist-friendly side of their heritage. But beyond that, it poses some frank, uncomfortable questions about what a British film industry wants to be, and what we want others to want it to be, and whether the two can ever be accommodated.

Nick Lowe

# PRIEST KING *of* TARXIEN

*Lionel & Patricia Fanthorpe*

**"L**uqa, it is against all our law and custom. Gaia herself forbids it. You must not attempt it. Don't ever think about it again..."

Her only answer was a kiss that silenced Safi's desperate protests. Her strong young arms drew him irresistibly closer. Lost in her warmth, the priest's vows to Gaia snapped like frail ropes straining to hold some vast stone block. Luqa was all that mattered to him now. Death was a pale and distant shadow that no longer influenced his decision-making.

Afterwards, they swam for a while, graceful as dolphins in the warm, blue water of Marsa Creek. Moonlight silvered the wave crests; reflected stars danced in their gentle valleys.

Luqa gave a momentary shudder. "Those poor sailors," she said, "and the slaves chained to their oars. How beautiful the sea is tonight: so calm, so different."

"Was it here?" asked Safi.

"Less than a hundred paces from the shore," she answered. "We heard their dying cries even above the storm. It is said that they were carrying the Golden Bull of Gozo back to Rome as a gift for their Emperor."

Safi shivered despite the pleasant warmth of the blue water.

"Let's go back now," he said suddenly.

They turned and headed for the beach. The soft, southern Mediterranean breeze dried them as they strolled like a god and goddess of bronze towards the forbidden Temple.

"You are the first woman who is not of Gaia's people to enter the Holy Chamber of Dreams," whispered Safi. There was awe in his voice. "I am breaking the Timeless Law of Gaia, the Great Earth Mother. Ever since the secret Dream Chamber was first cut from this living rock, only the most devout followers of Gaia have slept here. Only for them has she parted the Veils of Time and given precious glimpses of unknown futures."

Was it too late to stop this madness? Luqa walked unsuspectingly ahead of him; she was still a few steps from the Temple door. Perhaps he should seize her and carry her back to her father's village, even now? Chief Gudja would almost certainly kill him when he heard what had happened, but what did that matter beside the wrath of Gaia? Luqa had already been promised to Qadi, son of Mgarr, the Western Chief. Cattle and fertile pasture land had been exchanged for her. There would certainly be war.

She glanced back and smiled at him, her eyes bright with excitement, her face, radiant with adventure. Such a woman was worth a war – a thousand wars. After she had slept in the forbidden Chamber of Dreams they would have to try to escape somewhere across the sea...

Her buoyant confidence and courage were infecting him as he overtook her. He pressed the controls of the door in the secret way known only to the Priests of Gaia. It swung open and he led the way down steep, rock-hewn steps. The Dream Chamber was seven paces across, with stone couches cut into deep niches around its pale limestone walls. Since time out of mind Gaia's people had come here to probe the future with their dreams. In the eastern corner, where Gaia's husband Sol greeted her each morning through an aperture cut high in the stone ceiling, the sacred and undying fire glowed. Beside it stood an earthenware vessel full of the secret aromatic herbs the dreamers needed to fuel their mystic voyaging.

"What are these?" asked Luqa, running her hands through them, and squeezing a leaf experimentally between finger and thumb. She smelled its strange fragrance.

"We call it Dhalam's Wings," said Safi, "the Wings of Darkness. My father's fathers said the Tritons brought it to Melita when they taught us how to build the First Temple." He held up one five-lobed leaf. "These herbs are powerful and dangerous. The more you burn, the more deeply you sleep and the further into the future the Wings of Darkness can carry you, but who would dare to go beyond all time, to dream the end of all things? Who would seek the land that lies beyond the last tomorrow?"

"These Tritons?" she asked. "The Priests of our New Way say they are only pagan legends: the so-called children of nonexistent Neptune."

Safi shook his head. "The Tritons of my ancient fathers' times are older than the stories of the gods of Olympus. In our tradition they came from the stars, from the world of Orion... I have never seen one, but my ancestors say they are part man, part water beast, and that their original home was a world of water..." He held her hands and looked deeply into the beautiful bright eyes. "Why is this dreaming so important to you, Luqa? You are a follower of the New Way. You were baptised by the Holy Man who was shipwrecked. What do Tritons mean to you? What does Gaia matter to you? Why do you come to me, a Priest of the Old

Faith? Why do you seek to dream of the future?"

Steadily she returned Safi's gaze. "My father has sold me to Qadi, son of Mgarr, Chief of the West. He thinks I am beautiful and so my father obtained much land and many cattle." She gripped Safi's hands tightly. "I think Qadi is cruel, evil and brutish. He has many women already and soon tires of them. I will never go to him." She pulled Safi towards her and kissed him. "When I was a child, before the Holy Man of the New Way was shipwrecked, my mother took me to worship Gaia in your Temple. I saw you there in purple and scarlet robes, your golden girdle gleaming in the sun. I was only a child, but my heart yearned for you... I told my mother as we walked home, but she laughed and said it was impossible. Gaia's Priests have no land, no cattle. The daughters of Chieftains must be exchanged for many beasts and fertile fields."

"You saw me so long ago?" whispered Safi, "and you've wanted me since then?"

She smiled again and her eyes shone even more brightly. "I was forbidden to explore the great sea caves, but I have crawled through utter darkness into their farthest depths. I was ordered never to swim to the other islands, but I have battled my way there through rain and storm, against waves higher than your Temple walls. I was told not to climb the cliffs of Pitkal on the southern shore, but I have stood among the gulls who nest there." She laughed defiantly. "I was told by the Priest of the New Way that I must never again enter the Temple of Gaia. I was told I must go as a virgin to Qadi..."

"Do you truly love me for myself, or am I only one more sword with which you can attack the world?" asked Safi gently. "Would you still want me, and Gaia's dreams, if we were *not* forbidden?"

Luqa was very still and silent for a long time before she answered. "I want the caves, the cliffs and the freedom of the sea. Forbidden or freely given, I want them for themselves, for what they are. Forbidden or freely given, I want you and your Chamber of Dreams."

"Then with all my heart, I give you both." Safi threw a carefully measured handful of herbs on to the sacred fire and went to bar the chamber door. Silently, swift as a flash, while his back was still turned, Luqa added a *second* handful, and lay down in the niche nearest to the thick, aromatic smoke...

She found herself floating in a gleaming metal cylinder, brighter than the moonlight above the dream chamber. Masses of screens and dials glittered and sparkled along its silvery walls. Three huge piscine humanoid shapes looked up at her...

"Luqa, daughter of Chief Gudja, you have created something of a problem for us..." She thought she saw one of the great beings moving its lips but the words were bypassing her ears, leaping into her mind as pure thought. Before she could attempt to answer, she became aware of Safi floating beside her.

He reached for her hand. She knew they were touching, yet it felt more like a butterfly's wing against a flower petal. The great finned, articulated humanoid answered her unasked question.

"Your minds are projected here. Your physical bod-

ies sleep in Gaia's Temple."

"Tritons?" asked Luqa.

"So your people call us."

"Why?" asked Safi. It was the philosopher's why that begged for but did not really expect to receive the answer to life itself. A vast gift of concentrated data hit Luqa and Safi like an avalanche. They absorbed it very slowly, like children exploring a newly discovered labyrinth below the simple, shallow, familiar sunlit cave they had always called home.

They became aware of a very distant world and a race of alien beings: the Tritons. There was an unimaginably long and difficult journey, a failing ship, a forced landing and no hope of travelling farther, an adaptation to earthly conditions, an awareness of human beings, a benign acceptance of their company and of their vital differences. Somewhere, behind it all, the faint but vital hope of eventual rescue glowed.

Luqa and Safi could not begin to assimilate the complex biochemistry and neurology that accounted for the racial differences which mattered so much to the Tritons. They saw consciousness like theirs which could travel independently of a physical body while that body still lived and another type consciousness, like that of the Tritons which could not.

Somewhere from that maelstrom of data, they salvaged the central concepts. Triton consciousness was liberated from its physical body only by death. Human consciousness on rare occasions, in the right conditions could be liberated before death, and could return. The Tritons longed to share the esoteric knowledge of the future that a human messenger could reach, but they could not.

"Luqa, you are the best astral traveller who has yet entered the Chamber of Dreams. You have the potential to go deeper into the past or further into the future than any messenger we have yet had, but the courage which gives you your strength is also your weakness. You have created great problems for yourself and others: Qadi and Mgarr have already begun preparing for war; your people of the New Way are angry with Gaia's people. What you and Safi have done has already been discovered, and Gudja has sworn to kill Safi. Even now he is leading a war party to Gaia's Temple... If they destroy your bodies you will be of no use to us."

"But you have powers beyond our understanding," said Luqa. "You have weapons that could defeat even the great legions of Rome... Three of you could conquer our entire world so easily."

"We also have our weaknesses," said the Triton, a wry smile on his strange, angular face, "and one of them is called morality. Does an adult fight a tiny child and retain his integrity and self-esteem?"

"What is to be done, then?" asked Safi.

"What would satisfy both Gudja and Qadi?" asked the Triton.

"My death," said Safi quietly.

"Or gold beyond their wildest dreams," mused the Triton. "Perhaps we should consider the overwhelming power of Roman Law, the Pax Romanorum. A galaxy went down in the great storm last week... It lies beyond all human reach but well within ours; and it

carried a unique treasure for which the Emperor yearns. He has offered a vast reward."

"I must return and face them," said Safi grimly. "Luqa's sleeping body must not be disturbed while she is dreaming. Or she might die."

"You're almost ready to wake," said the Triton. "I will send you back."

"If any harm befalls him," warned Luqa, "I will tell you nothing of what I see – even if it is the rescue ship you long for." The Triton's strange features rearranged themselves into an enigmatic smile.

"We have some small skills which may help him," it said. "But human behaviour is always unpredictable. We can guarantee nothing, but I promise that we will try."

Luqa pushed herself upwards by a supreme effort of will. The waves closed darkly over the gleaming cylinder in which she and Safi had conversed with the Tritons. Below her now spread a gigantic panorama of land and sea, yet it was much more than that. There was a weird sense of *had-been-and-shall-be* for which she had no words. *Then and now* had become points of her hugely augmented mental compass, as real and accessible as north and south. She performed a wide hypersphere, a huge, ultracircular, multi-dimensional swoop, like a migrating bird getting its bearings. She glimpsed the ancient Borg Nadur people and the men and women of Bahrija. She saw the stricken Triton ship arrive and plunge into Marsa Bay. She watched Phoenician and Carthaginian merchants sailing into prosperous harbours. Roman war galleys dotted the horizon and faded again as Luqa skimmed ever further and faster through time and space. She wheeled past *now* and willed herself on towards the far future. The Legions withdrew. The Arabs came. The Tritons waited resignedly in their silver cylinder beneath the sea. Norman banners flew over the former Arab cities, and an indistinct procession of Spanish-Sicilian kings passed beneath her like coloured shadows at sunset.

Limestone touched her left arm and hip momentarily. She was *almost* back in the Chamber of Dreams, but the air there still retained the last remnants of its aromatic fragrance and Luqa forced her stirring body to inhale deeply. The sensation of touching limestone vanished, and once more she rushed headlong into the future.

Knights of St. John from Cyprus and Rhodes established themselves and beat off a vastly superior Turkish force. Napoleon's fleet came and went almost instantaneously. Red, white and blue British flags flew over the Maltese islands. Then came a bombardment so heavy that Gaia herself seemed to have risen in volcanic anger. Strange airships spat fire and death in every direction. Luqa sped on before the stone couch could draw her back. Far below Marsa Bay the tireless Tritons waited out the centuries... *And then she saw it...* At last, a silver cylinder like the first, but not stricken... flying gracefully and under perfect control, hovering over Marsa Bay.

The physical reality of the stone couch could no longer be denied. The aromatic smoke was too thinly dispersed to be effective now. Luqa felt the limestone beneath her lithe young body and sat up.

Safi was unbarring the door. She ran to the Priest and stood behind him, her arms encircling his waist. There were distant torches approaching from two directions, accompanied by loud angry voices.

"Marsa Bay," whispered Luqa. "We must run." They sped like deer between the converging groups, racing desperately for the shore. Without pausing they dashed into the waves and began to swim.

"Enough!" The Triton reared up beside them. "I have brought what I promised." His huge, jointed hands held out something heavy, which had been bound carefully in leather.

"And I have seen..." began Luqa breathlessly. The Triton smiled.

"I know. We cannot voyage, but we can read our voyagers' minds. Triton's ironic, angular expression clicked into a slightly different position. "It will be a long wait, but we have the twin gifts of patience and longevity. Yours is the harder task: for you must reason with unreasonable people."

The huge aquatic form slid down into the waves and vanished.

A third torchlit procession reached the Temple of Gaia. Luqa and Safi watched and listened from the protective shadows beyond the outer wall. This third procession was accompanied by the rhythmic, sinister clinking of armour and weapons.

"In the Emperor's name," demanded a voice that silenced Gudja, Qadi and their belligerent followers, "what are you doing here?"

Luqa sprang forward and held out the golden bull which she had just unwrapped; its ruby eyes gleamed vividly in the torchlight. "We have recovered the Emperor's treasure," she said proudly, "and we claim the protection of Rome and the promised reward."

It is interesting to read the semi-legendary *History of Safi, Priest-King of Tarxien*, in the Valletta Archives. He and Queen Luqa seem to have enjoyed a long, prosperous, adventurous and eventful reign as Roman Vice-Regents of the Maltese Islands, during the first and second centuries. Orthodox historians disregard *all* references to their alleged friendship with the mythical Tritons, while serious theologians and hagiographers never mention the apocryphal Shrine of St Gaia, which was said to have stood beside the Hypogeum during Safi and Luqa's long reign.

**Lionel & Patricia Fanthorpe** are married and live in Cardiff.

The above is their first story for *Interzone*. Their collaborative novel, *The Black Lion*, appeared in 1979. Long before that, Lionel (now 60 years of age and still an amazing ball of energy) wrote some 150 books, mainly for a paperback publisher called Badger and mainly in the period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. He almost certainly holds the record as Britain's most prolific *sf/fantasy* writer, and will probably do so forever. (His pseudonyms included "Leo Brett," "Bron Fane" and "Pel Torro.") For many years a school headmaster, Lionel is now a Church of England clergyman. Patricia is his regular collaborator on fiction and non-fiction, and acts as his agent.



Until he found the mermaid it had been a normal day for Joseph Wheatley: on leaving his house he had found something vile smeared across the door, and later some children in the street had called names and thrown a few stones. No one had threatened to kill him, at least.

Wheatley was a Riding Officer, so he was used to threats and occasional violence. He was employed by the local Collector of Customs to patrol the shore between Beaumont and Harwich, a part of the on-going struggle against the smuggling gangs who used this coast for their illegal activities. As almost every family in these parts either worked for, or bought goods from, the so-called "Free Traders" his role was not a popular one.

After cleaning the mess from his door, Wheatley saddled up his big grey mare and set out. He headed inland towards the Stour estuary before doubling back towards Little Oakley. He knew his neighbours kept a watch on him, so he was always careful to lay a false trail.

He rode at a steady pace, avoiding settlements

wherever possible. He skirted around the village and soon he was on the scrubby patch of ground that fringed the saltings. Immediately he became more vigilant, searching the horizon for signs of business, searching the ground over which he rode for any clue that the smugglers had been this way. On some patrols he was lucky enough to stumble across a trail, or even a cache of goods – there was so much illegal trade these days that even a fool must find something eventually. He knew the story of one such fool: some years ago, D'Oyley from Frinton had fallen through the covering of a pit dug as a temporary storing place. Apparently he had drunk himself unconscious from a half-anker of geneva and when he awoke it was to discover that the smugglers had returned and removed their booty from around him as he slept.

Coming upon a rough track, Wheatley jerked at the reins and his horse turned south. Inland the beast was quite eye-catching but out here, in the misty Essex salt-marshes, her grey colouring merged with the background. Particularly on a day as gloomy and damp as this.



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

Some time early in the afternoon, Wheatley found a trail. Fresh boot-prints in the mud, the imprints of hooves and the wheels of a chaise. He suspected that if he had passed through Little Oakley earlier he would have noticed the absence of a number of the village's inhabitants.

He dismounted and followed the tracks a little more cautiously. As always, at a time like this, he considered the situation he feared most. It was four months since his son, John, had gone. It was most likely that the lad had made his way up the coast in search of his accursed mother, but the possibility Wheatley feared was that the boy's wild spirit had led him in other directions. Back in Benacre the boy had been friendly with a family closely connected to the Hadleigh Gang, one of the most notorious smuggling rings north of the Thames. When his wife had moved back with her family, Wheatley had taken the boy away, at least in part to break his ties with the gang. What if he had renewed his links? What if he was out there now?

Such fears made Wheatley acutely aware of the barker he carried in each pocket of his long coat: he

had fired these small pistols before now in pursuit of his work, and he knew that he would have to do so again. It was a brutal world. He would forever curse his faithless wife and all her family, but even so he prayed to the Lord that John was safely with her now.

He paused where the scrub gave way to salt-marsh. He would be a fool to follow the trail any further. A few years ago, when he had first been employed as a Riding Officer, he would have mounted his horse and set off in search of one of the regular patrols of dragoons and they could have returned to confront the smugglers on the beach. But circumstances had changed: the soldiers were in Europe, fighting the French, the Spanish and the Prussians over the succession to the Austrian throne; those that remained were too few for the protection of a mere officer of the Revenue.

He tied the mare deep in a thicket of gorse and pine, then emerged and climbed to the top of a low ridge, from where he could survey the saltings. The overgrown mud-flats extended for maybe three fur-

longs ahead of him, before being cut through by the silver ribbon of a tidal creek. Beyond, the shaggy grey-green mat extended to Pewit Island and across Hamford Water and more saltings to the earth cliffs of the Naze three miles away, now smudged grey by the clouds and drizzle.

He was about to go for his horse and ride out to investigate when he saw a line of dark figures returning across the marshes. He had decided there must be nobody out there, but they had merely been obscured by a ridge of dunes formed where the first creek joined a larger one. Wheatley scrambled back into the thicket. If he rode off now he would be seen and pursued. His best hope was to stay hidden with his horse and hope they would be too distracted to notice him.

He waited for what seemed like forever and then he heard the voices growing steadily louder. He had guessed right: they had been drinking while they worked, the liquor part of the payment for their labour.

Wheatley peered out from his hiding place. It was a group of about 30 – men, women and children. Most would work on the farms: their pay – and other benefits – from a few hours unloading boats in the saltings would probably double their week's wage. He watched closely, willing his horse to remain quiet as he committed the evidence of his eyes to memory. He had only been in Harwich for a year, but still he was able to identify a number of those who paraded so unwittingly before him. Tall, cadaverous Robert Ames from Little Oakley was a man they had suspected for some time. So too were Robert Crompton and Forbes Clay from Dovercourt. And although he was not here in person, Wheatley was certain that the single chaise loaded with several half-ankers of spirit and two mud-daubed infants belonged to Thomas Cann, landlord of the King's Head in Harwich.

As he watched, Joseph Wheatley considered that if he could prove charges against these people, they would be transported to the colonies and all their goods seized and sold. He knew they would do almost anything to stop him.

He froze, aware that movement would be the surest betrayal of his presence, as he saw four men following a little behind the main party. They were talking and laughing, but there was something in their expressions that marked them apart from the group they trailed. That, and the guns and broadswords they carried. The locals were merely the paid labour: these men were the real bandits, along with their colleagues out at sea.

If these men saw him, they would kill him without compunction. Under the Act of 1736, the penalty for any assault on a Revenue man was death on the gibbet, but he knew that the King's law carried little weight out here. This was smuggler's country and the laws people obeyed were the laws of the smuggler. The gangs were far more efficient than any force marshalled by the King or his Parliament.

Wheatley waited fully an hour before venturing out from his hiding place. It was now mid-afternoon and he was certain no one would be back before dusk. He was equally certain that they would return: you do

not need 26 labourers and four armed bandits to unload the four half-ankers of drink and small heap of packages Wheatley had observed in the back of that chaise.

Fighting to be brave, he mounted his horse and set out across the saltings to see what had been left behind.

He carried a barker in his hand, aware that there might be guards posted with the rest of the haul, although he thought it unlikely. This part of the marshes was not a place a man would visit unless he had good reason: a barren spur of overgrown salting jutting out from dry land, leading nowhere.

He approached the ridge of sand dune, studying its outline against the grey sky for movement or the shape of a head. Nothing. Behind him, also, there was no sign that he was observed.

He dismounted and walked towards one sloping end of the dune. He left the horse tied to a tuft of marram and scrambled up and across the shoulder of the dune, fearful that if he led the mare any further she would lose her footing and tumble over the sharp mud precipice to his left and onto the soft ooze of the partly-obscured side-creek six feet below.

Pistol thrust before him, like a lantern in the dark, he rounded the dune. To the seaward side the sand sloped away gently to the mud-flats of the main channel. The wet sand and mud carried the imprint of what had taken place: heavy gouges where two large, oared boats had been hauled up, countless footprints and drag-marks, a carelessly dropped bundle of rags. Out in the bay Wheatley could see a packet boat under full sail out of Harwich, and a couple of mussel dredgers working the sandbanks.

Methodically, he walked along the loose white sand at the front of the dune, prodding with a stick of driftwood to see if the cache had been buried just below the surface. Nothing.

At the far end he climbed up into the thick marram at the top of the dune and looked back across the marsh – all clear – and then towards his horse.

He ducked down, quickly. The dune was shaped like a squashed torus: a double dune, with a hollow in the middle. In that hollow was a large heap of barrels and crates and bulging sacks, and guarding the goods was the hunched figure of a man.

Wheatley blinked hard, pistol heavy in his hand. He prayed again that he should never confront his son in such a situation, scared that he should shoot before recognition dawned, scared that John would shoot regardless.

He relaxed as he realized that what he had taken for the form of a man was merely an arrangement of sacks partly obscured by some crates.

The place was deserted. With a last look towards land, Wheatley descended into the smugglers' pit.

Judging by the sheer volume of goods, those two boats must have made a number of trips between shore and their mother ship. He counted more than one hundred half-anker tubs of geneva alone. Other, unmarked, barrels would hold cognac and rum, and

the crates appeared to hold mainly tea, which at two shillings a pound in Amsterdam or Ostend was less than half the after-tax price in England. The risks of smuggling might be great, but the profits were always far greater. Only last week Mr Davies had told Wheatley that more than three-quarters of the tea drunk in England was imported illegally.

Under a tarpaulin Wheatley found more crates of tea, along with others he found to contain lace and calico.

All the time, he was careful to keep a watchful eye over the lip of the dune; also, he was careful to reseat any crates he opened, so that he left no evidence of his examination. He knew that by the time he was able to report his find the smugglers would have returned. This place had the look of a regular landing site: the best Wheatley could hope was that it could be watched and the smugglers be rounded up on the next occasion of its use.

The last box he chose to open was long and narrow. Shaped, he suddenly realized, like a coffin.

He felt a strong urge to leave it, then, but his curiosity won in the end: what should smugglers want with a coffin, he wanted to know? Or, more realistically, what could they be importing that was best packed in a case so shaped?

With the blade of his knife he worked around the lid, freeing it from the nails that held it in place. When he slid the lid back he had no idea what he would find, but despite the shape of the box the last thing he had expected was to see the face of a woman. Or a girl – he could not tell. Peacefully composed, the face had the delicacy of feature of a ten-year-old, but the dark, weathered skin of one much older.

Despite the intense smell of brine and decay, he pushed the lid so that it came clear and he saw that the girl's slim body was naked. Coarse brown hair nestled around her broad shoulders, her arms, pulled forward, squeezed small breasts together. Her skin was covered in a fine golden down, her spade-like hands clasped together barely covering the thick tuft of hair at her groin, her legs thickset and heavily muscled.

Wheatley tore his eyes away. He made himself scramble up the dune again, to survey the horizon for any sign of danger.

For once in his life he did not know what to do.

He struggled to understand what he had discovered. She was an ugly creature, sure enough, despite the response the sight of her naked body had triggered in him. But why bring her into the country in this manner? Was she one of the smugglers' own, brought back to be buried on dry land? That might explain the look of her: a young woman, aged by time at sea.

He returned to the coffin and reached across it for the lid. He would seal the thing and return to Harwich to make his report. It might just be possible to raise some men and be back for the smugglers tonight if he was quick.

His hand brushed against the girl's arm and he flinched. Her skin was warm.

He stared at her, clutching his hand to his chest as if it had been scalded. He reached out again, touched her brow with the back of his hand, then leaned close to her part-open mouth.

She was warm and – almost imperceptibly, but definitely – she was breathing.

Now he knew that he must move her, get her away from these villainous men who would transport a young woman in a sealed coffin. He reached down, slid his hands beneath her arms and pulled her so that she slumped against him. He jerked her arms over his back, hauled at her so that she was across his right shoulder and stood.

She was oddly heavy for such a small thing – standing, she would barely reach his chin – and he staggered awkwardly up the yielding, sliding inner incline of the dune. At the top he lost his footing and collapsed to one side, spilling the girl onto the sand. A soft cry escaped her lips and her body spasmed.

Wheatley drew back, suddenly doubting, suddenly fearful. He glanced to one side, where the horse was shifting uneasily, tugging at the clump of marram where he had tied it loosely.

When he looked back the girl was staring at him, and he realized that she was even more scared than he had been. He raised a placatory hand and said, "My name is Joseph Wheatley, Riding Officer of the port of Harwich. I..." The look of incomprehension in her eyes stopped him. She might be witless, he supposed, or Dutch or, even worse, French. "I represent King George the Second of England." That sounded good, he thought.

With a sudden flip of the body, the girl was on her feet, scurrying and slithering down the slope of the dune. She was dragging a lame leg behind her and that drew Wheatley's attention to the unnatural broadness of her feet.

"No!" he cried, too sharply, for it only increased the speed of her escape. He tried to move, but could not do so. "The creek!"

She didn't pause. She reached the edge of the high mud bank and dropped.

From the sound of her impact, Wheatley knew the ooze was as soft and deep as it had looked. Even as he scrambled down the dune in pursuit, he knew that the bank was too high for him to reach down for her, and he would gain nothing by throwing himself into the treacherous mud after her.

He reached the edge and looked over. The soft grey-brown ooze had closed over her already. He hated to think of her struggling to breathe, somewhere underneath all that.

He walked along the creek. It was barely 15 feet wide, the soft mud merging imperceptibly with a narrow channel of water that flowed sluggishly near to the far bank.

There was no sign of her.

Dejectedly, he went around the dune again, and then he saw movement, out in the middle of the main channel, where it widened towards the bay. Something had briefly broken the surface.

He stared and then he saw it again. It was unmistakable: hands, arms, and then the head and shoul-

ders of the girl, rising and diving, followed an instant later by a sharp splash as paddle-like feet surfaced, driving her forward. She swam like a porpoise, as if the sea was her natural element.

She was submerged for several long seconds and then, hands together before her, she broke the surface in a sudden surging movement. For an instant her entire body was clear of the water, and then, with barely a splash, she plunged back down and was lost to sight.

Joseph Wheatley found Griffith Davies, Collector of Customs, supervising the search of a mussel dredger at its berth in Harwich. He went to stand by his superior on the wet wooden planking of the quay.

Davies was a gruff man, newly chosen as mayor of Harwich largely on the strength of his reputation as a hard man to better. He had been Collector for 13 years, unpopular as much as anything for his view that all smuggling was to be regarded the same, from the large-scale landings by the gangs run from Flushing or Paris right down to a few items of lace sewn into the lining of a coat or the dropping of a few tubs of rum over the side of a packet boat.

Wheatley was more pragmatic than his superior: he knew how overstretched the service had become, with the army and navy busy overseas and too few revenue cutters to police the coast. The biggest loss of revenue to the Crown was that incurred by the gangs – that was the reason they were supported so well on the supply side by their masters in Holland and France: smuggling was a form of economic warfare and men like Wheatley and Mr Davies were the King's defenders.

"They been cooeping again, sir?" asked Wheatley, nodding down at the search in progress. Out over the whelk and mussel beds the dredgers would pull up alongside a smuggling ship and later return to port with all manner of luxury goods secreted onboard.

Davies grunted, then belched. "Not if they're wise," he said, scratching under his wig.

They watched in silence for a short time. "Who's that with Bentley?" asked Wheatley, eventually.

"Tom Gage. Nephew of mine on a visit. Always full of answers, so I thought I'd show him the truth of it. Been sick once, with the smell of it." Davies laughed.

Wheatley took a deep breath. "Sir, I need some men as soon as possible," he said. "I saw a landing down at Oakley Creek. I suspect they'll be back for it at night-fall."

"Bentley!" shouted Davies, without ceremony. He gestured briefly and the two men abandoned their search. He turned to Wheatley. "You have two, for a start. Send Bentley to round up Kempster and Spells. You take yourself to the constabulary and the barracks to see if any bodies can be spared. What is it? What's the matter?"

The mention of bodies reminded Wheatley of the girl, the mermaid. After she had fled he had returned to the coffin. In it he had found a hard metal box about three inches in each dimension. Also, there had been a braid of hair that had been tugged from her head, not cut – he could see the roots. He had them

both in his coat pocket as he spoke.

"Sir, there's more than I have told," he said awkwardly. "There was a girl, sealed up in a crate. I set her free and she jumped into a creek and swam away."

"Across the creek, you mean?"

Wheatley shook his head. "Out to sea, sir. She wasn't really a girl, sir. I fear she was a mermaid."

Davies looked at him as if he was a raving fool. "A mermaid?" he said. "In these waters?"

That had worried Wheatley, too. He had never actually met anyone who had seen a mermaid, and the accounts he had heard always related to voyages to distant lands. "She was in a box, sir. They must have caught her in the tropics and brought her here as a curio." The creature would have been quite valuable to a freak show, he supposed.

"You're sure of this? Body of a woman with the tail of a fish?"

Wheatley shook his head again. "Big hands, and feet she used like paddles, sir. Otherwise she could almost be human."

Davies had recovered his composure by the time Bentley and young Gage came to join them. "Fetch Kempster and Spells," he told Bentley, then to his nephew he said, "You go with Wheatley, here. He's to lead a party down the coast to confront a gang of banditti. You shoot straight?"

Gage was excited. He looked to be about 18, with teeth too big for his mouth and eyes too big for their sockets – a face, Wheatley thought, he might one day grow into. "Yes sir," said the boy.

Davies turned to Wheatley. "I'll await your full report," he said. "Good luck." And he went down to talk to the captain of the mussel dredger.

Johnson, the town constable, was happy to accompany Wheatley and the boy. "Oh, yes," he said, when they explained what they were about. "I'd like to see that Robert Ames in gaol at last. He's a danger to all concerned."

The three of them set off for the barracks. Johnson rode his old brown nag, while Gage was mounted behind Wheatley, talking all the time. He wanted to know where they were going, who they were to confront and what their firepower was. "You can rely on me, sir," he said, again and again. "I can fire a carbine or a pistol and I'm good with the broadsword too. You have to be brutal with these banditti. You have to hit them as you would hit a dog, I say. You..."

Wheatley soon learned to stop listening. He suspected young Gage might cause trouble in the years ahead of him.

They were delayed at the army barracks for longer than Wheatley had anticipated. The officer in charge was reluctant, although he knew it was his duty to find men if any could be spared. Thomas Gage did not help matters by trying to pull rank. "My uncle is Collector of this port," he said. "You must support this man!" Somehow, Wheatley and Johnson were able not only to talk the boy out of trouble but also to secure the services of four dragoons.

They met Bentley, with the other waterguard,

Kempster, and the port's second Riding Officer, William Spells, as dusk gathered over the seafront by Dovercourt Bay. After being delayed again while Wheatley explained the urgency of the situation, the party of nine men and eight horses set out along the coastal track towards Oakley Creek.

It was a long ride, through rough country populated only by sheep and wild things. Soon even Gage fell silent, sensitive to the tension they all felt. Several times one man or another would flinch and reach for a gun in response to a bird's sudden cry or the sound of the wind's gusts across marsh and scrub.

When they reached the thicket where Wheatley had hidden from the smugglers that afternoon he dismounted. Squatting down, he peered into the near-darkness. Difficult to say, but he thought the marks in the mud were greater, the wheel-ruts more than had been caused by the passage of the single chaise earlier.

"They've been again," he said, straightening.

"Are they out in the marsh then?" said Gage. "Can we advance on them and trap them?"

"We could wait here," said one of the soldiers. "If 'em's out there then 'em has to come back." And it would be easier to flee if the arresting party proved to be out-gunned.

Wheatley remounted. "We go out," he said. If they had been and gone already then he had to investigate the landing place. If they were still out there, then it was his duty to confront them.

Behind him, the others hesitated then, muttering amongst themselves, they fell in single file and the party set out across the salt-marsh.

It was difficult to make out more than a few humpy shadows ahead and Wheatley had to concentrate hard to keep to the track and avoid the creeks. Halfway out they were disturbed by the startled cry of a redshank and Wheatley sank low in his saddle, cursing the bird they called the sentinel of the marsh.

Up ahead, there was no sign that anyone had heard the bird; all they could see were the dark shapes of the dunes, rising up from the saltings.

By the time they reached the first bank of sand he knew that they must be too late. He left his horse and advanced up the dune with Gage and Johnson.

All the barrels and crates had been removed, all the sacks and tubs.

Dejected, he walked back and forth across the sands. He stood for a long time at the point where the mermaid's coffin had been but it, too, had been taken away.

Down on the shore the sea was receding. He searched the firm sand but even the signs of the landing had been washed away by the tide. He might have imagined it all but for the braid of hair and the peculiar box in his pocket. He had tried to open the thing earlier, prising at it with his knife where the lid appeared to fit, but in vain.

He stared out into the wide channel of the main creek towards the bay, hoping to see the creature again.

As he stared his vision began to blur and somehow



sharpen simultaneously. Although it was a cloudy night it was as if the moon had broken through and cast a shimmering curtain across the water, beyond which everything wavered and smudged, yet everything nearby was so sharp.

He gasped, felt that he was swaying on his feet.

"Are you certain this was the place?" The voice belonged to the constable, Johnson. "These marshes can all look the same."

To an outsider, Wheatley added for him. He pressed a hand to his head. "It was here," he said. "She..." Johnson looked at him strangely and Wheatley shook his head. Out in the creek the strange curtain of light had gone.

Up on the dune again, Wheatley saw that Spells was leading the rest of the party back to dry land, fearful still that they might be ambushed. Glumly, Wheatley, Johnson and Gage followed them back to the coastal track. As they set out north it started to rain again.

Late that night, Wheatley sat in his cottage, the door securely barred. He sat at a wooden bench with his journal open before him. By the light of an oil lamp he tried to focus on the page, but his vision was swimming again.

It was a Riding Officer's duty to keep a daily account of his activities in his journal and Wheatley was always meticulous about this. Others, he knew, were less so. Edward Moseley at Clacton had been caught by his supervisor only the year before, tucked up safely in bed with a harlot, his journal written up three days in advance.

For a few more minutes he struggled to record the events of the day, forming each letter carefully with his newly trimmed quill. He had to abandon it, eventually, the feelings of nausea and dizziness too great for him. He would finish it in the morning, before he rode out on his patrol.

He rose, and as he passed by the door he felt the sudden urge to empty the contents of his stomach. He tapped the board free, pushed at the door and then he was out in the street vomiting into the mud.

When he was done he stood up and rubbed at his beard. The steady drizzle was refreshing on his upturned face.

Eventually he went back inside, swung the door shut and climbed the steps to the little cottage's single upstairs room. Too exhausted to undress, he was soon asleep.

He was woken by the sound of voices in the street, then a sudden battering at his door. He struggled out from beneath his blankets and hurried to the window, then stopped himself. He did not need to open the shutters to picture the scene below. Turning away, he cursed bitterly, remembering that he had left his long coat hanging from its nail downstairs, a barker in each pocket.

He moved to the head of the staircase just as the front door splintered and then gave way.

The shouts and cries became suddenly louder as the mob spilled into the house. Wheatley saw the flickering light of a torch before he spun away and

went to the window.

He had the shutters half-opened when the first hand fell on his shoulder and jerked him round. A fist smashed into his face, someone yanked at his hair and then his vision momentarily blackened as something hard drove the wind from his chest.

They dragged him down the steps feet first so that his head thud-thud-thudded all the way down.

"What did you do with her?" demanded one of the men, pulling Wheatley's head upright with a sharp tug at his beard. All the men reeked of liquor, no doubt the spoils of their evening's work. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

A club smashed into his shoulder and a stab of pain shot up his neck.

"The girl! The mermaid!"

"Not me," he managed to mumble. How did they know that he had freed her? In the brief respite he was able to recognize the sunken features of Robert Ames, the man he had rashly dismissed as mere paid labour that afternoon. The smugglers must have been hard on them for the loss, perhaps refused to pay in full. And now Ames had led a lynch mob here to make Wheatley pay.

They dragged him outside, through the mud and puddles, past where he had been sick earlier. They made him stand, then pushed him along the street and then down the track towards the shore, shouting at him and cursing him all the way.

He was certain that they would kill him now. As well as Ames he had identified Robert Crompton, Jasper Mayes and the two Cann boys whose father had the King's Head in Harwich. The penalty for what they were now doing was death on the gibbet, if Wheatley lived to tell.

On the beach they set on him from all sides. He knew it was pointless but his pride made him swing out with his fists and feet: if he marked one or two of them badly enough then perhaps Johnson or Mr Davies would connect their injuries with Wheatley's murder.

Grateful that he always slept in his boots, one of his feet connected with something soft and a man squealed in pain. Immediately a club struck Wheatley across the side of the head and he found sand and shingle pressed into his face as he hit the ground.

Lying flat on his front, he knew that all his hope was gone. He could only pray for swift release.

But the mob did not follow up their assault. Instead, silence descended.

Wheatley twisted painfully onto his side, pushing his dizzy head up clear of the beach.

Around him he could see the legs and lower bodies of the mob, perhaps ten of them in number. He blinked hard to clear his sight. The men were visible only in silhouette because a short distance down the beach a shimmering curtain of pearly luminescence hung.

Wheatley struggled to a sitting position, and then to his feet. He had seen this apparition earlier, down by Oakley Creek, only then it had been less striking, less awesome.

He pushed through the knot of men. Someone tried,

half-heartedly, to seize him but he shook their hands free with ease.

Then he was out in front of them and suddenly the younger Thomas Cann, less awestruck than the others, seemed to understand that Wheatley might escape and indict them all. The boy lunged at Wheatley, who sidestepped, staggered away. There was a sudden shouting and then, before he knew what he was doing, Wheatley turned and took three huge strides, passing through the distorting, flickering screen with a brief tingle of the skin, leaving the mob behind him.

The sun burnt down from low in a sheer blue sky and Wheatley jammed his eyes shut, dazzled by the glare.

To his left lay the sea, much as before except that under this bright sun it had become the purest shade of turquoise, flecked with the ivory teeth of gently breaking waves. Before him, the beach stretched straight for about two furlongs and there Wheatley saw the strangest of constructions: instead of the familiar winding creeks, straight canals had been cut into the shoreline and instead of overgrown, matted salting there was an evenly spaced series of domes and cubes, looking at first to be cast from the sand, then showing themselves to be made of a sheerer material, something glassy and translucent. There were people moving about this perverse colony, both in the water and on land, and powerful, streamlined vessels skimmed low across the surface of the sea like swallows dipping for water in a mill pond.

Wheatley heard a noise and he turned. A man was approaching him down a rough earth cliff that was festooned with some kind of fruit-laden vine. The man wore only a pair of much-mended trousers and he was whistling as if he had not noticed Wheatley.

Panic finally rising to the surface, Wheatley turned sharply and threw himself back at the shimmering wall. He felt the same transient buzz of energy and then he was in darkness, landing heavily on the ground, crying out with the pain of his many injuries.

He raised himself cautiously, expecting at any second to be set upon by the cheated mob. But he was no longer on the beach. In fact he was no longer in Dovercourt where his cottage was to be found. Beneath his feet were the cobbles of sea-hardened clay known locally as kidney stones, which were used to pave the streets of Harwich: he had been transplanted almost a mile to the north-east.

He closed his eyes and recalled the strange apparitions of only a few minutes before. What had that sea-beast done to him, he wondered? Had she bewitched him? Cursed him for the fact that he had kept on his person a braid of her hair and a strange black cube? Was he to be damned to strange visions and sicknesses for ever more?

He recognized where he was – Church Street, near to the Three Cups – and he decided that he might as well make his way to William Spells' house in nearby King's Quay Street for the night. Trying to think about what had happened only served to make his head hurt even more than it did already.

Spells only had to see the state of him to forgive being roused so late in the night. He had his wife fetch some water to bathe Wheatley's injuries, then swept up the straw on the floor so that it formed a heap for Wheatley's bed. "They'll hang from the gallows for this," Spells said, always ready with words if not with actions. "They'll be strung up on Dovercourt beach for all to see."

Wheatley chose not to mention his fantastical and perhaps diabolic means of escape. He did not know if he would be able to find words to make the fellow believe.

He slept uncomfortably, with the smells and sounds of a strange house. Early in the morning there were children filling the room; four of them, he thought, although he felt too thick-headed to bother to count.

The first thing he did, upon leaving Spells' house, was return to his own cottage and survey the damage. Deprived of their victim, the mob had clearly returned here to get their revenge. Everything within had been smashed or stolen and a fire had been started but, thankfully, had failed to spread.

He found what was left of his journal in the ashes.

Out in the street, he was aware of his neighbours watching him. Never openly hostile, they had always made it plain that they resented having "the Preventive Man" in their midst. They would be gloating now, no doubt.

His horse was missing from the yard at the back, but he found it shortly, grazing on the rough land behind the start of the saltings. He led it back, saddled up and rode into Harwich in grim mood.

Bentley was alone at the Customs House. "At the Three Cups," he said, in response to Wheatley's query as to the whereabouts of the Collector. He had looked at Wheatley's battered features without comment – if he needed to know then he would be told. "With Mr Clement and a representative of Mr Phillipson." James Clement was Agent for the packet boats that took mail and passengers to the continent, Phillipson the town's Member of Parliament.

"Customs business, or Mayor's?" Wheatley asked. The Three Cups hotel was often used as an alternative civic building, with additional benefits that other such buildings did not have.

Bentley looked at him strangely. "Have you not heard?" In response to Wheatley's blank look, the waterguard continued. "The collier *Hanover* was due in port on the tide at first light, with coal from Sunderland."

"It's failed to appear?"

"It was sighted by other vessels just beyond Landguard Fort not long behind schedule, yet now there's no trace."

"Run aground on a sandbank? Attacked by privateers?"

Bentley shook his head. "Gone," he said. "Absent. No longer there. Mr Davies is much concerned."

Wheatley made his way to the Three Cups, passing on his way the place where he had found himself deposited late last night. He reached into his pocket where he still had the mermaid's hair, reminded that a tuft of his own had come out this morning, no doubt

yanked loose in the fighting the night before. The box had been nowhere to be found – neither in the house nor on his person. He supposed it was now in the possession of Ames or one of his accomplices, along with his barkers and his broadsword. He considered discarding the braid of hair, freeing himself of all connection with the strangeness of the day before, but he could not bring himself to do so.

He went into the hotel.

Davies, Clement and a third man were at a table near the door. They saw him as soon as he entered. He went to stand before them until Davies acknowledged his presence. "My nephew informed me of your failure," the Collector told him, rising to lead him out to the yard, where they could talk in private. "You disappoint me."

Wheatley looked down at the ground. "The handitti had removed their goods before we returned," he said. "We were as prompt as was possible. I have further news to report, sir. Upon my return to my lodgings I was set upon by a riotous mob, led by Robert Ames of Little Oakley. They assaulted me most grievously, sir – I believe they would have murdered me if I had not made my escape. They fired my journal, and wrecked my home, sir. With your permission I will go with Mr Johnson to arrest them at once."

Davies shook his head. "No jury would send a man to his death on the strength of a Revenue Officer's word," he said. "That's been demonstrated often enough."

Wheatley was dismayed at his superior's response, although he recognized the truth of it. He said nothing.

"I have more to concern me today," continued Davies. "And you have patrols to keep up. You have your duty." The Collector turned as if to dismiss Wheatley. "Sir, they knew about the mermaid." He was being foolish, he knew, persisting as he did.

Davies glared at him. "What are you saying, officer?"

Wheatley did not know what he had meant to imply but suddenly, in Davies' response, he had a terrible suspicion of where the smugglers had bought their information. Was Mr Davies as rotten as Lisle, the supervisor at Colchester, was rumoured to be? He had a hard reputation but, as he considered the matter, Wheatley suddenly knew that the Collector's record hardly justified the image he propagated.

"Nothing, sir," he said softly.

When Davies had dismissed him, Wheatley walked slowly back to where he had left his horse at the Customs House. He felt sick with betrayal, and still he hoped fervently that his suspicions were unfounded. Bentley was in the yard, seeing to Spells' horse.

"I found him," said Wheatley, and Bentley nodded. "Tell me, I've only been in Harwich for the year: why is it that Mr Davies' reputation is so respected?"

Bentley looked away. "Collector for 13 years," he said. "He's earned it." But Wheatley was sure he detected a tone of insincerity in Bentley's response. He mounted his horse, and walked it out into the street. He would go and borrow a barker from Spells, then he must patrol – do his duty as best he could. That was all that was in his power to do.

After his patrol he cleared up the house, certain that, with the effects of the liquor worn off, the mob would not return.

The next day, he set out early, dejected by the memory of what had happened in his house and by his suspicions about the Collector. He rode hard, reaching as far as Beaumont Quay, but found no fresh sign of smuggling activity.

On his return along the coastal track, he passed the path that led out to the place where he had freed the mermaid.

He rode on hard, until he came to a stretch of raised land that thrust out through the saltings as far as the beach. Out on the exposed mud and rock, he could see a wagon and a knot of people, all stooped low, gathering seaweed to enrich the fields. He knew he should approach them, to make sure that it was, indeed, only weed that they gathered, and not weighted packages dropped in the night, but instead he rode on. He was in no mood for confrontation today, for the insolence and hostility of these people who saw no harm in depriving the Crown of its dues.

It was the horse that drew his attention to the apparition. Wheatley had been lost in his thoughts until he noticed her pulling away from the track, tossing her head in distress.

He looked up and across the marsh: there was a flickering, a shimmering, another rent in the air.

Wheatley dismounted and immediately the grey mare broke free and galloped inland.

He remembered how it had been before – the beach, the strange boats and dwellings, the man – and was no longer scared. Cautiously he advanced until he could reach out and touch the divide. He thought of what he would be leaving behind. He thought of his missing son.

He took another step and passed through.

The sky was cloudier now, much as it had been on the other side of the divide, and for a moment little appeared different.

Looking about himself, Wheatley realized that he had emerged at a different place. To his right – the south, he supposed – the gently sloping beach curved away forming the southern sweep of a promontory. To his left, a low knuckle of land jutted out into the sea, its slopes carefully cultivated with the vine he had seen before.

For a time he stood quietly, convinced that he was alone in this strange otherworld. Then he saw one of the fast, skimming boats angling across the sea, heading north.

He made himself move, aware of a renewed heaviness in the depths of his stomach. He hoped he would not be sick again. He hoped this was not merely an hallucination induced by some illness.

He reached the promontory and followed a path up its gentle slope. A bunch of purple fruit hung from a vine and he reached out to take one. As soon as he touched it the thing stung him sharply, and he hurried on, fearful of what he had brought upon himself by coming to this place.

At the crest of the hill he could see out across a

wide bay and he realized he was looking towards where he had appeared in the night. It took him a time to comprehend what he saw. The bay was not a natural landscape of curves and creeks and marsh, it was formed of straight lines, angled inlets and canals cutting inland, as if it had been engineered on some enormous scale. He could see what he had decided before was a settlement, with its pearlescent, geometric buildings connected by channels of water and strange pipes.

And he could see the collier *Hanover*.

The ship was lodged halfway up the beach, as if hurled there by some giant hand. One great mast was broken and there was a hole in the near flank. The hull lay across the shattered fragments of what must have been several buildings, and the whole vessel looked as if it would topple onto its side at any moment.

He could see men all around the *Hanover*: huddled knots of them, others scurrying about, yet others prostrate on the beach.

As he watched, from the distance of about a mile, Wheatley began to form a picture of what had happened. He thought of the shimmering curtain – some kind of entranceway between Harwich and wherever this was – and he knew that if he could pass through then, if the passage was wide enough, so could a ship such as the *Hanover*.

He hurried down the slope. He was a Riding Officer: it was his duty to do what he could to help.

As the distance between Wheatley and the town narrowed, he began to feel that a little caution would not be misplaced. He left the beach and headed up the slope until he found a path that paralleled the shore. He felt reassured to be able to identify some of the vegetation through which he passed: elm and pine and hazel were scattered amongst the ubiquitous vine, which he now saw varied slightly in colour and size from place to place.

A short distance from the beached collier, Wheatley climbed up into an oak and what he saw justified all his caution. The small clusters of men he had seen were the crew of the *Hanover*, held captive by the others, who Wheatley now saw were physically similar to the mermaid he had rescued. Most were naked, or nearly so, revealing the same powerful musculature and broad hands and feet. Their skin was of a deep golden hue, covered in some instances by a mat of glossy hair more dense than Wheatley's own body hair. They were pointing what appeared to be carbines and pistols at their captives.

The dead on the beach were both men and these strange beings, so that Wheatley could not tell who had fought first.

He knew that it was beyond his power to rescue these men. All he could do was pray on their behalf. He climbed back down to his track and headed south.

He must have emerged in this world in the morning, judging by the passage of the sun across the sky. Now, with the sun heavy and red over the rising, forested hills inland, Wheatley was feeling hungry.

He had met no one all day, hardly surprising as he



had spent most of that time in hiding on the promontory. He had seen more fast boats on the sea, and late in the afternoon he had witnessed them hauling the *Hanover* down the beach. He had expected her to sink directly to the sea-bed, but the hole in her hull must have been repaired for now the ship was anchored safely in the bay. Save for the broken mast she had looked perfectly seaworthy.

A short time after witnessing the *Hanover*'s return to the water, Wheatley had observed another flickering curtain, this time beginning a few yards out to sea. Peering through it, he had made out the form of a house, some people. He wondered how it must appear from the other side.

Transfixed, he had walked down the beach towards the manifestation. Suddenly, one of the shapes took more solid form and a ragged grey sheep plopped through, bleating madly. As the beast splashed around helplessly in the surf all Wheatley could think was *mutton*.

He had followed the sheep a short way down the shore as its struggles grew steadily weaker. Eventually he waded out and hauled the beast up the beach. It was too exhausted to struggle when he took his knife to its throat.

Now, he sat on the beach, recovering his breath, hoping for a cloudy night so that the smoke from his cooking fire would go undetected.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of whistling coming from along the beach. It was the same eerie tune he had heard once before. Sure enough, when the man came into sight it was the one he had seen on the cliff the previous night: tall and so thin that his skin stretched from bone to jutting bone, his face richly bearded, his hair curled and unkempt. He walked casually along the beach, where the sand was firm from the retreating waves, idly looking about as if searching for treasures deposited by the tide.

Wheatley sat upright, one hand resting protectively on the sodden flank of his sheep, the other on the stock of his borrowed barker, half-drawn from his coat pocket.

The man was almost level with Wheatley when he stopped abruptly, broke his tune with a sharp gasp, then turned to face him. He must have seen Wheatley's pistol, for he spread his hands defensively to show that he was unarmed. "*Bonjour*," he said. "*Je suis sans méchanceté*."

"Unh?" Wheatley did not like the sound of the man's words: a foreigner, almost certainly an enemy of the King. A Dutchman perhaps. Maybe even French. "What do you say?"

"Ah." The man smiled and took a few steps up the beach. "*Anglaise*, of course." He nodded towards the sheep. "And your friend?"

Wheatley realized that his hand was still resting protectively on the beast's flank. He snatched it away quickly. "Food," he said.

The stranger looked at him witheringly. "*L'Anglaise*," he said, shaking his head. "Come with me. I will show you food. You are new in this land, *n'est-ce pas*?"

Wheatley stood reluctantly, glancing at his sheep.

"Nobody will take it while we are absent," said the man. "Let me assure you." He turned towards one of the coastal paths and Wheatley followed him.

"What language is that you speak?"

The man smiled. "French," he said. "But let me assure you – I put a finger to each side of his head, like horns – I am no *diable*, merely a man who has been born in Le Havre. I am called Michel."

Wheatley had never met a Frenchman before, unless he counted a smuggler said to be a Parisian who had died in a gun battle up at Benacre Warren four years ago. "How did you come to be... here?"

"My vessel was off the Naze and it passed through the *fuite*, the seepage. We ran aground on an artificial reef under the bay and I was lucky enough to survive. My friends..." He shrugged and looked down.

Wheatley was horrified. This man was a privateer – why else would his boat have been in English waters? – a supplier to the smugglers! His hand was still in his coat pocket, on the stock of the small pistol. "You are under arrest," he said, struggling to muster a tone of authority. "When we return to... to... upon our return you will be sent for trial, do you hear?"

The Frenchman smiled again. "*D'accord*. Here!" He reached up to a cluster of purple fruit on a vine and snatched one down. It did not appear to sting him.

"But –"

"They are protected," said the Frenchman. "But nothing is infallible. You look for one with the bugs, you see?" He pointed to a cluster of fat greenfly on the plant he had raided. "Where there are the bugs the protective mechanism must be at fault, *non*?" He took down some more fruit and tossed one to Wheatley.

Wheatley snatched his hand from his pocket to catch the fruit. It was about the size of an egg and it rested comfortably in his cupped palms. He looked at it suspiciously. The Frenchman was happily munching at fruit from the same bunch so Wheatley raised the thing to his mouth and took a bite.

He had expected juiciness, and the sharpness of a gooseberry, but instead the skin was thin and the flesh firm and springy. The flavour was vaguely similar to poultry, without the stringiness and gristle. Wheatley felt the juices rising in his stomach – he had not eaten all day – but he tossed the fruit aside as if he did not care. He could always find more later when he had subdued this uncultured brigand.

"Why do you whistle everywhere you go?"

"To declare my approach in a gentle manner. You heard me first, *non*? I think you would be more likely to shoot a man who creeps about in silence than one who openly parades with a tune at his lips. That is my tactics. *Les sirènes* – the people of the sea – generally are not concerned with men like you and me, living as we do on their fringe. We are a whole community of waifs, lifted by chance into this world, living off the scraps we can find. *Les sirènes* are only drawn to hostility if we interfere with them. Or if we land a ship in their town. They, too, would not shoot a man whistling one of their tunes wherever he goes. I have been here 97 days, I have learnt how these things are."

Wheatley was greatly relieved to confirm that there

were others in this predicament: he was not fated to be alone forever with a Frenchman for company. And then he thought again of John. Was this better than any other fate he had feared for the boy?

He took a fruit from the unprotected vine, deciding that he should stick to practical matters and satisfy his hunger while he had the opportunity. "Where is this place?"

"It is... the same place as before, I think. *Non*, it is different, too. We are in your Harwich, yet it is not as it should be, much as *les sirènes* are the same as you and me, only not so. You see?"

The Frenchman clearly knew English words, but had momentarily lost track of how to use them. Wheatley nodded vigorously, nonetheless.

Michel started again. "Nearer to their town, one can listen to the music. The air swells with their song, it is a way that they talk. I have learned some of these songs, and with it some of their talk. Once, a long time ago, our ancestors lived as these people do, before we took over the land. These people never gave up their aquatic ways. They are as we might have been, non? This world is as our own might have been, you see?"

Was he talking about the Flood, Wheatley wondered? If so, then his talk was probably blasphemy. "This is a different world?" he asked. He had assumed that somehow they had merely been lifted to the East Indies, or Africa.

Michel nodded. "Some great alternative, I think. *Les sirènes* are a powerful people. They push their world through a multitude of alternatives, seeking always to be closer to the Lord. It is a natural process, but also one that they have learned to guide and manipulate. That is as well as I understand that particular song."

"And they gather us along the way."

Michel shook his head. "That was an accident," he said. "Their song-lines are not always united. They fight between themselves. Before we arrived something happened. *Une catastrophe*. There was sabotage and the control of the Older Ones lost focus. The seepages began to occur, the overlaps between alternatives. Their quest is suspended as they seek to put right what has been destroyed."

Wheatley thought for a few minutes. "I found a mermaid," he said. He remembered what Michel had called them. "A... a *lay-see-ren*? It swam away." He felt in his pocket for the braid of hair. "All it left was this and a strange black cube."

"You have it also?"

Wheatley shook his head. "Ames took it from me, or someone from his mob. He wanted the mermaid, you see. He thought the beast was worth a lot of money. It is complicated."

"I am sure," said Michel. He reached up for a bunch of fruit of a deeper hue. "And now we will have something a little sweeter, I think."

When Joseph Wheatley awoke, Michel had gone. Unnerved, he scrambled up out of the fold in the rocks where they had found shelter for the brief night, but there was no sign of the Frenchman. He cursed

his lack of vigilance, that his prisoner should escape so easily. Secretly he was relieved that he no longer had to concern himself with the practicalities of conveying the Frenchman into custody and deciding what he might be charged with, other than simply being French.

He headed north again, feeling melancholy and a little guilty at how easily he had abandoned his responsibilities. He had to *do* something. As he walked, he whistled self-consciously. He had never been musically inclined, so what he whistled was a somewhat incoherent jumble of phrases half-remembered from church, but he felt it would serve its purpose. Eventually he came to the familiar promontory where he had hidden for most of the previous day.

From the top of the rise he looked towards the merfolk's town. The *Hanover* had gone, too. He wondered if it had sunk – a repair effected so quickly could not be expected to last long – or if it had set sail, in this realm or another.

Suddenly, he was thrown to the ground by a great blast of air. When he stood he turned and saw that the end of the promontory was cut off by another shimmering curtain, beyond which he could see the fuzzy shapes of what he took to be a Harwich street.

A man came tumbling through, caught himself, and with a scream threw himself back across the dimensions.

Wheatley looked to either side and saw that the curtain stretched in each direction for at least 50 yards. Down on the beach, an old woman stooped under a bundle of firewood was paddling fearfully in the surf. Clutching at her skirts was a child and then the two were joined by another woman, presumably mother to the child, daughter to the crone.

The younger woman screamed and that stimulated Wheatley to action. He ran at the join between the worlds. His skin tingled, as if stung all over by one of the protected vines, and then he was through, his feet skidding on kidney stones made slick by the morning rain.

Behind him, the curtain shimmered and flickered relentlessly, and all around him people were in a state of panic.

Wheatley did not know how long he had, so he ran all the way to the Customs House. Rounding the corner of Church Street, he caught himself an instant before passing through another rent in the air.

The Customs House was no longer there. Along with half a ramshackle row of tenements and most of the street it had been transplanted into the otherworld. In their place was a length of shingle beach, great waves appearing, as if from nowhere, to break on its steep flank and then retreat and vanish.

Wheatley spun on his heels. If what the Frenchman had told him was true, then Wheatley was probably the only person in the port who had even the remotest idea of what was happening. He had to find Mr Davies, or even Mr Clement or one of Mr Phillipson's men.

He headed towards the Three Cups, and gradually a semblance of normality settled around him.

That semblance was shattered when he opened the doors and saw a trio of naked mermen holding the landlord, Mr Hallsted, at what appeared to be gunpoint. To one side, a semi-naked woman was pointing a gun at a group that included the Collector. Wheatley had never seen his superior looking so infirm: his skin was pale and lifeless, his eyes sunk back in their sockets.

Wheatley made a hasty retreat. Struggling to understand all that he had seen and heard, he headed back towards the Customs House. The shimmering wall was still in place.

He took a deep breath and passed through.

The cold hit him like a fist and he exhaled sharply, great bubbles rising around him in the water. He started to breathe in, stopped himself, but not in time. He coughed, choking, and gasped again, but in these briny depths there was no air and he felt the dark water flow into him.

His vision blurred, went black, and there was nothing.

He came to with a great, repeated pressure on his ribcage. Someone was sitting on his chest, pushing down and then releasing. His head was turned to one side and he vomited a salty fountain across the sand and then his whole body heaved violently with his coughing and spluttering.

Some time later he was able to sit. Around him there was gathered a tattered group of men and women. They had a fire going, and he pulled himself nearer to its warmth. There was a pot nestled in the flames, filled with a broth of what appeared to be fish and the local fruit.

Wheatley felt that he was going to be sick again, but he restrained himself. With a desperation that took him by surprise, he peered into the faces of the people around him. There were three men and two women, ranging in age from a boy of about 14 to a man of perhaps 50. He slumped back – he recognized none of them.

No one had spoken and Wheatley was wary to do so, for fear that they might be foreign. He did not feel well enough to arrest anyone else today.

"I was most positive that you were drowned," said the older man, suddenly. Despite his rags and new growth of beard he had the voice of a gentleman.

Relieved to hear an English voice, Wheatley said, "That was my fear, too. I am indeed most grateful to you and your comrades."

"It is our habit to observe whenever the lights appear," said the man. "They are not always courteous enough to deposit a man on dry land, as you discovered. My name is Thurgood."

"Joseph Wheatley, sir." He bobbed his head, then glanced at the others.

Thurgood smiled. "You won't find much conversation here, I'm afraid. Andrew, here, is a little touched by his experience, and our three companions speak no language I know, and I am fluent, indeed, in four foreign tongues."

"They are French?"

Thurgood shook his head, and Wheatley felt relieved.

"I was here before," he said. "Somewhere else on this forsaken coastline. There was a Frenchman there."

"The whistler?"

Wheatley nodded.

"I encountered him not long after I arrived. It appears to be not uncommon that a person should be sadly affected by their passage to this place. I have seen him since, but choose to avoid his company."

Wheatley approved. It was to be expected that an English gentleman should avoid the company of a Frenchman.

"You say you have been here before? Then you imply that you have also left this place, do you not?"

"I returned to Harwich through one of the seepages," said Wheatley. "I am an Officer of the Revenue. It was my duty to return and do my best to warn my superiors of what I have learnt."

"A loyal man. Do you not find it pleasant here?"

A strange question, Wheatley thought. One that had little meaning for him. He decided that, for all his gentlemanly ways, he did not like this Thurgood much more than he had liked the Frenchman.

When he had recovered a little more, Wheatley made his farewells, saying that it was his duty to assess the extent of the crisis. Before he left, he asked if they had encountered a boy, 15 years of age, hair like his only with more red to it. "John Wheatley," he said. "My son."

Thurgood bobbed his head from side to side. "Perhaps," he said, irritably. "Who knows? So many people pass through this place. I will make enquiries, if that is what you wish."

Wheatley thanked him and left, taking the direction Thurgood assured him led towards the settlement.

He walked for a long time, his doubts growing steadily greater. He had almost reached the point of turning back when the curve of the coast revealed his familiar promontory about two miles ahead of him. He wondered if the fact that he had been deposited at such a great distance indicated an escalation of the seepage problem.

Even from this distance, he could see that the tip of the promontory was still cut off by the shimmering wall. As he approached closer, he saw a number of people gathered on the beach. The old woman had used her sticks to start a fire and was haranguing everyone about the final days of the world and the coming of the Lord. Somewhere in the distance he heard the sound of two gunshots.

He passed through the gathering, recognizing some of the faces, nodding to the Reverend Henry Creek who was making brave efforts to calm the old woman. He was about to climb across the neck of the promontory when a voice called him back. "Mr Wheatley?"

He turned to find a girl of about ten, twisting her hair nervously between her fingers, ready to run. He recognized her and smiled. "Hello," he said. It was one of the Spells' children. "Are you alone here?"

The girl shook her head. "Mama's with the Vicar," she said. "Tom and Luke's up in woods where our houses've been put, sir."

Wheatley turned to look and to his amazement he saw a row of timber-framed houses, partly obscured by the way they were wedged amongst the hazel trees and the vines. "Your father?" he asked.

"Oh yes, sir. Papa's here too, sir. He's hunting the smugglers with young Master Gage."

Wheatley groaned. Mr Thurgood had said that many people were touched by their passage through to this world: it would take such a mental trauma to stir Spells to action, he thought. But he believed it. Particularly if the Collector's nephew was involved.

He hurried up the hill, fearful of what he might see.

Of all the sights he had imagined, what presented itself to him was not one. Half a mile out in the bay, the Customs House loomed out of the water and on its roof about 30 young merfolk played and chased, diving into the sea, shooting up out of the waves to land on the roof again.

Where the geometric settlement had been was now a mixture of pearlescent domes and pyramids interspersed with blocks of brick and plaster buildings, all subsiding into the straight channels and canals these folk had constructed for themselves.

And on the beach between Wheatley and the town a battle was taking place. He recognized Spells and Bentley, hiding behind an overturned wagon, others taking shelter in the sloping woods, or behind rocks by the tide's edge. Exchanging sporadic fire with them was a lawless bunch of men: Wheatley recognized Forbes Clay and the group of four smugglers he had seen only a day or two previously, and with them perhaps 20 others. Out in the water, a number of boats skimmed about like flies over a dead bird, the merfolk clearly torn between intervening to protect their own and leaving these wild men alone to settle their differences.

It was then that he identified young Thomas Gage. One of the merfolk's boats was heading directly for the beach, the angle of its approach taking it across the flank of the bandit's defences. Riding the boat, working its controls, was the boy; lying prostrate at its bow were two men, long rifles tucked into their shoulders, ready for the command to open fire.

Wheatley drew his pistol and started to run down the slope.

The sudden buzzing sensation was all that told him he had passed through another rent in reality.

A new brick wall was suddenly before him and he raised an arm to stop himself against it. He turned and across the cobbled street he saw a wide canal and on its far bank a big square building that appeared to glow in what was now the beginning of twilight.

He turned and ran and a few seconds later he saw the dilapidated bulk of St Nicholas' church sitting as an island in a deep blue pool, mermaids clinging to the building's septaria walls and the slope of its tiled roof. Suddenly the doors flew open and a torrent of water burst out and in a flickering blur there was a speed boat, two men with guns cocked ready and a laughing, hysterical Tom Gage at the controls.

On the main road out of Harwich things appeared a little more stable. Where the kidney stones gave way

to hardened mud a block of labourers' houses had been uprooted and replaced by a wide area of shingle and here the displaced citizens of the town had gathered to wait out the upheavals.

It was here that Wheatley came across the Frenchman, once again.

He had dug out a small hollow and he sat there, hunched over, a blanket pulled tight about himself. The look in his eyes was blank, unfocused, and Wheatley would not have recognized him if it was not for the constant, wheezy whistling that came from his lips.

He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook.

Michel stopped whistling and gradually his gaze found its focus. Suddenly, he raised his hands as if to defend himself. "Non!" he cried. "Je -"

"Stop it!" demanded Wheatley. "I have no wish to hurt you. Tell me what is happening."

Michel looked at him suspiciously. "They used me," he said. "*Les sirènes*. There was sabotage. Revolution. That is why it is as it is. Important parts of their machinery were stolen - they used me to question people new to their world. They have to recover what has been lost if they are to heal the rifts all about us."

The man was crying, now, and for the first time Wheatley felt a little sympathy towards him. For whatever reasons, he had been trying to recover something that had been stolen. "The black cube?" he asked.

Michel nodded. "The last piece," he said.

Wheatley left the Frenchman in his hollow. He had a job to do.

On his way back into Harwich he changed worlds four times. On the first occasion he was returned to the surf by the promontory, where most of the Harwich refugees had come through. Across the promontory he fell through another curtain and found himself inside St Nicholas' church, the air full of interwoven mermaids' voices, raised in what he vaguely recognized as song.

Almost immediately he was back on the beach, in the midst of the battle. He ducked under cover, with an encouraging shout from William Spells, and then he scrambled up the overgrown slope, lucky not to be shot as he fled.

After the next jump he found himself in Church Street and in a short time he was standing outside the Three Cups. As he had suspected, Mr Davies was sheltering within, although the armed merfolk were now nowhere to be seen. With him was Henry Stevens, Inspector of the Waterguard, an obsequious slacker Wheatley had never had much time for. He pushed past him, and drew his pistol. Levelling it at the Collector's chest, he realized there was no need for this: Davies looked even more ill than before and Stevens was too much a coward to do anything.

"The box," said Wheatley. "It has to be returned."

Davies looked blank. "I -"

"I know you have it." He reached out, pushed the Collector's wig back on his head and tugged at the dark hair beneath. A handful came away. "It does this to you. It makes you sick, too. I know. I need it." After

ransacking Wheatley's house, the lynch mob must have reported back to the Collector with anything they thought valuable.

Stevens was twitching from foot to foot, looking suddenly terrified. Wheatley turned to him and the Inspector jerked a hand from his pocket and tossed the small black cube across as if it was burning him.

Wheatley ran out into the street, praying to the Lord that he was not too late. Remarkably enough, he found the big square building exactly where it had been a short time before. He walked as far around it as he could, but it appeared to be surrounded by a deep canal, with no access from dry land.

"Please!" he cried, suddenly despairing. "I have what you need!"

There was a sudden turbulence in the water and then a head broke the surface. She had become completely bald but he knew it was the first mermaid, the one whose braid of hair he still carried.

She approached him gracefully across the canal, and then emerged, the water running down from her body. She smiled, with what appeared to be uncertainty, and held out her hands.

"How do I know you will return it?" Wheatley asked. What if she was one of the rebels? What was it that made him so certain she should be on the right side?

She clearly could not understand his words. He had to decide.

He handed it over, and he prayed that the look of triumph on her face was there for the right reasons. Without a glance she turned and dived into the water and in an instant there was not even a ripple to betray her passage.

Over the course of the next few days, the town started to return to a semblance of normality. Indeed, some parts of the town merely started to return.

The splits in reality began to heal over and it appeared that the respective worlds were being set back in roughly the order they had enjoyed before.

The battle on the beach had been a bloody affair, with approaching 20 men killed and many more badly wounded. Wheatley was not disappointed to learn that Ames and several of his accomplices numbered among the dead.

Davies appeared a broken man. Perhaps in a manner of divine retribution, his past corruption had caught him up and now he was but a sick and fearful shell of his former self. Wheatley suspected he would not have much of a part to play in the future of the port of Harwich, and was content to let it rest at that. He had seen young Gage not long afterwards, and explained to the boy as best he could that his uncle would probably never be the same again. He felt sorry for the boy, in an odd sort of way. "Have you considered the Army?" he asked him. "You would do well, I'm sure. You would get to travel, too," he added wryly. Maybe they would send him to the New World – the place was big enough for the lad, by all accounts: he could hardly cause much trouble over there.

Wheatley felt that his time in the town was done. He had passed the stage of wondering whether leaving was a good idea or not, and now it was only a

question of destination. Perhaps he would be able to make a new start in London.

He was sorting through his few possessions when there was a sound from outside, and then the door burst in.

He went for his pistol, but when he had raised it he found that he was aiming it, in the situation he had dreaded for so long, directly at the chest of his son. John stared at the gun and then at his father, and then came into the room grinning. "Father!" he cried. "You'll not believe where I've been!"

Wheatley smiled, a decision taking shape in his mind. "Oh, I just might," he said. "I just might!"

Later, the two set out together. "Where to?" asked the boy. "How do we get back?"

"The marshes," said the man. "If we're quick, there might just be time."

*Author's note:* Griffith Davies was a resilient man: town records reveal that he went on to become mayor of Harwich on 14 further occasions, before his death in 1778. There is a distinct possibility that his nephew, Thomas Gage, is the same Thomas Gage who, 11 years after the events of this story, sailed with his regiment to the Americas; later he became commander of British forces in North America and was largely behind Parliament's inflammatory response to the Boston Tea Party, and the first skirmishes of the War of Independence. The historical record makes no further mention of Riding Officer Joseph Wheatley or his son, John.

**Keith Brooke**, Tewkesbury's most famous sf writer, has written numerous stories for *Interzone* ranging from "Adrenotropic Man" (issue 30) to "Riding the Serpent's Back" (issue 101). Lately he has experimented in collaborating with Eric Brown (as has Stephen Baxter): we may see one of the results here soon.



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# JOHN BRUNNER

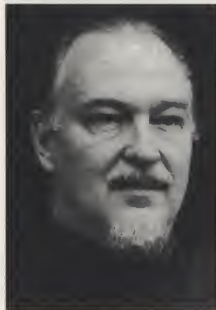
Brian Stableford

John Brunner, who died during the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow in August 1995, was probably the most prolific British science fiction writer of all time. The 1996 *St James Guide to Science-Fiction Writers* credits him with 58 sf novels and 13 short story collections (plus 11 non-sf novels – at least two of which are marginal sf – and the classic fantasy collection *The Traveller in Black*). It is further noted that nine of his early sf novels (all published in book form by Ace, some of them relatively short) were subsequently reissued in revised and expanded editions. Although the number of his sf volumes was exceeded by both John Russell Fearn and R. Lionel Fanthorpe – both of whom wrote more extensively than he in other fields – it is likely, given the much greater length of his later productions, that his total wordage within the genre matches theirs.

This is all the more remarkable given that although Brunner began publishing in the same milieu as these production-line hacks, with *Galactic Storm* (1951, issued under the house pseudonym Gill Hunt) he swiftly moved on to higher things. Much of the work he did for the US paperback market in the early 1960s was produced in haste but it had a competence and variety beyond that attained by writers who made the same progressive step – most notably Kenneth Bulmer and E. C. Tubb – and was in any case only a transitional phase in his career. It was superseded in the late 1960s by the heyday of his reputation, during which he produced a remarkable quartet of alarmist novels encapsulating all the key anxieties of their day and anticipating several of the key anxieties of ours: *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975).

No other British sf writer evolved so far or so fast – and no other, having built a career and a reputation, saw them fall into such awful and

traumatic decay. Although his was a unique case, it might be reckoned all the more interesting because the awkward ebb and flow of his fortunes mirrored and magnified a predicament in which many other British sf writers found themselves as they were caught by the tidal forces ripping through their marketplace.



Indeed, Brunner offered a useful running commentary on the vagaries of the sf marketplace in a number of frank and fascinating articles he wrote for fanzines, beginning with "The Economics of SF" in *Vector* 37 (January 1966) and "More Economics of SF" in *Vector* 56 (Summer 1970) and continuing in a regular column he wrote for *Science Fiction Review* in the late 1970s.

*Galactic Storm* was written while Brunner was still at school, and whatever its faults its publication must have greatly encouraged him in the belief that there was a living to be made from the vocation of science fiction. It was only two years later that he made his first sale to John Campbell's *Astounding* – the novelette

"Thou Good and Faithful", published under the pseudonym John Loxmith – and placed the first of many colourful space operas, "The Wanton of Argus," in the short-lived pulp *Two Complete Science-Adventure Books*. The latter was signed Kilian Houston Brunner, those being his middle names.

Brunner came to pulp fiction as the medium was on the point of a dramatic transformation. He located many of his early works within the galactic empire backcloth which had been established as its most effective stage and was about to be adopted by Don Wollheim's Ace paperback line as a standard format. As with other British writers, Brunner's version of the galactic empire was calculatedly decadent, reflecting the confused post-imperial attitudes of his homeland as well as the fact that the milieu's sell-by date was fast approaching. He continued to sell occasional stories to Campbell and the editors of the other US digests which replaced the pulps, readily adapting to the future-Earth scenarios which magazines like *Galaxy* preferred, but his primary market during the late '50s and early '60s was the Nova stable of British magazines edited by John Carnell.

Carnell's magazines had grown out of the activity of a committed cadre of British fans of pulp sf. Although he played host to a number of writers whose work would develop spectacularly in other directions, the material Carnell favoured was not merely imitative of American sf but imitative of a kind of American sf which was already becoming passé. The Nova magazines did, however, have a marked commonwealth of concern with the Donald Wollheim's Ace paperback line, and longer works published there always stood a good chance of being reprinted by Wollheim.

It was this opportunity which shaped the early part of Brunner's career, during which he produced many novellas which were subsequently reissued or expanded as halves of Ace doubles. Indeed, he con-

tinued to cannibalize these works even after the day of the Ace double was gone, "This Rough Magic" (1956) forming the basis for his thriller *Black is the Color* (1969) and "The Gaudy Shadows" (1960) being expanded as another notionally non-genre novel in 1970. The best and most colourful of the early novellas, "Earth is but a Star" (1958), was fairly quickly reprinted as *The Hundredth Millennium* (1959) but was subsequently redeveloped in more lovingly attentive fashion as *Catch a Falling Star* (1968).

Carnell did run serial novels in *New Worlds* – including Brunner's first full-length effort, *The Threshold of Eternity* (1957-8; in book form 1959) – but the number of available slots was limited and additional competition was provided by such US reprints as Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* and Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint*. Given Wollheim's willingness to reprint long novellas and Carnell's willingness to use them as lead stories in *Science Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Adventures* it was inevitable that career-minded British writers like Bulmer, Tubb and Brunner would commit their best work to that format between 1956 and 1963.

One side-effect of angling for this kind of duplicate publication was that the work of these writers was channelled into the ultra-romantic action-adventure formats favoured in *Science Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Adventures*. Brunner made no conspicuous attempt to vary his style in novels and novellas that went straight to paperback, some of them under the pseudonym Keith Woodcott. It is probable that works like *Sanctuary in the Sky* (1960) would have been published in one or other of the Nova magazines had they not been produced so rapidly that the marketplace was perpetually supersaturated.

Many British sf writers were perfectly content to be directed on to this particular literary path, away from the more rigorous demands of what was then in the process of becoming identified as "hard sf" and away from the quasi-satirical near-future sf favoured by *Galaxy* magazine and Ballantine Books. Bulmer and Tubb were not the only British writers to adapt themselves so firmly to the pattern that their careers effectively died when Don Wollheim eventually became too ill to manage DAW, the company he set up when he quit Ace in the early 1970s. Brunner always wanted to be more versatile; he wanted to make the most of the relatively soft market which Wollheim offered, but he also wanted to pursue other opportunities as well.

Brunner's second serial novel for

*New Worlds*, "Put Down This Earth" (1961), used a near-future setting and attempted a more earnest extrapolation of contemporary social issues. It was diverted from the Carnell-Wollheim conveyor-belt to be published – slightly belatedly – in book form by Pyramid as *The Dreaming Earth* (1963). A virtual clone of the story whose magazine version sold to *Analog* was, however, too short to be anything but half of an Ace double. It appeared in that format as *Listen! The Stars!* (1963), although Brunner did expand it eventually into *The Stardroppers* (1972).



This shift in the emphasis of Brunner's work was further marked when he provided his gaudy dream-invasion story, "City of the Tiger" (1958) with a much better sequel which stepped back from the dream-world to the "real" world in which the telepathic therapist operated: "The Whole Man" (1963). In further expanding these two works into a full-length novel Brunner concentrated on the painstaking extrapolation of the near-future scenario, and did a very good job. Like Alfred Bester in *The Demolished Man*, he attempted to describe a society into which telepaths were awkwardly integrated but not fully accepted as professional functionaries, and he attempted to round out the character of the physically-handicapped "telepathist" Gerald Howson. The resulting novel was both convincing and moving. It was published in the US as *The Whole Man* in 1964 by the most prestigious of the genre paperback lines, Ballantine. Even more significantly, it was published in hardcover the UK the following year (as *Telepathist*) by Faber & Faber.

The same two publishers issued *The Long Result* (1965), which unfortunately failed to capitalize on the success of *The Whole Man*. More significantly, though, Ballantine – having revised their packaging strategy to give their books a more upmarket look – belatedly issued a near-future thriller called *The Squares of the City* (1965) which Brunner had been unable to place when he first wrote it. It received more critical interest than anything he had previously done, and it was shortlisted for the Hugo; its enthusiastic reception convinced him that although the novel had been ahead of its time when it was written in 1960, the marketplace was now ripe for exploitation. This was the beginning of the second phase of his career.

Brunner was enthusiastic to accept his promotion to a new level of marketability, and although he did not immediately let go of his safest option he began to detach himself from any real dependence on it. In 1965 Ace had published four of his novels, two of them back-to-back, but in 1966, 1967 and 1968 Wollheim only issued one book per year and after that Brunner never wrote anything specifically for him except for revisions of his earlier works. His desire to escape the Wollheim fold and move into the higher stratum of the literary marketplace is vividly obvious in his 1966 article on "The Economics of SF," which describes in great detail the ten-year struggle which composite sf writer Theokurt Frishblitz had to establish a fairly stable and very moderate income.

Although the two Faber volumes admitted Brunner into the select band of Britain's respectable sf writers – a position to which he was fully entitled, on the strength of *The Whole Man* – the publication of *The Squares of the City* must have seemed to him to be more important. At the time, the book's publicity concentrated on the fact that the plot was constructed according to the moves in a chess game, but in the personal statement in the *St James Guide to Science-Fiction Writers* Brunner offers it as evidence that "as long ago as 1960" he was trying to initiate some discussion of the "depersonalization" which would become a hallmark of the "computer age."

These publications allowed Brunner to begin the serious development of a new science-fictional agenda, buoyed up by further successes. He attained US hardcover publication for the first time with *Quicksand* (1967), a novel set in the present whose sf element – an enigmatic psychiatric patient – remains ambiguous to the end. Brunner had already published three non-sf novels by this time but

only *The Brink* (1959) had had any pretensions to literary sophistication. This was his first book which attempted to work as a novel rather than a thriller; its closest analogue among his other works is the little-known and underrated delusional fantasy *The Devil's Work* (1970).

It was *Quicksand's* US publisher, Doubleday, who contracted Brunner's most ambitious project to date, *Stand on Zanzibar*. By the standards of the American sf marketplace, *Stand on Zanzibar* was a daringly avantgardist production, but the mood in US publishing was very much in favour of such experiments. Doubleday had scored an unexpected hit with Harlan Ellison's anthology *Dangerous Visions* (1967), and had readily embraced the revolutionary hype with which that book had been so lavishly supplied. Brunner's novel mingled its main story-line – which was itself multi-stranded – with all kinds of supplementary materials, thus forming a dazzling kaleidoscopic image of an overcrowded and information-dense near future; this montage technique was borrowed from a John Dos Passos novel published in the 1930s, and the Malthusian theme was a commonplace topic of the day, but their combination was authentically synergistic. *Stand on Zanzibar* seemed to most of its reviewers to have been a successful experiment, and to promise much for the future of its author.

The method of working which Brunner adopted in *Stand on Zanzibar* compelled him to do imaginative work of a kind that no sf writer using conventional narrative technique had ever been required to do before. Indeed, previous writers attempting to broaden out their vision of the future by ladling dollops of the *Encyclopedia Galactica* into their work – usually as chapter introductions – had generally been thought guilty of the bad practice of "info-dumping." Brunner's glorious redemption of info-dumping on a massive scale enabled him to build an image of the future far richer and more elaborate than any that had ever been issued before.

Brunner's endeavours in his vein went unappreciated by a significant minority of readers – although even the disapproving were mostly prepared to concede that it was a worthy attempt to do something different – and he never attempted such a complicated weave again, but the task forced him to pay attention to a wider spectrum of inter-related social changes than anyone else had previously required to connect up and it fundamentally altered his view of the future. Although his subsequent attempts to extrapolate social and technological trends into the near future were more conventional in

their cast, they retained the legacy of the breath of vision and sensitivity to cross-cultural connections that *Stand on Zanzibar* had demanded.

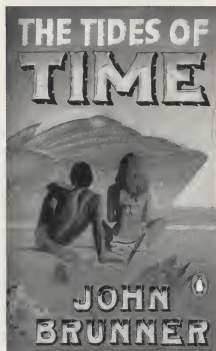
In 1968, presumably inspired by the artistic and commercial success of Ballantine's repackaged sf line, Don Wollheim's editorial assistant at Ace, Terry Carr, launched the now-legendary "Ace Specials" line, which briefly outshone its rival in its ambition and hospitality to experimentation. Some Wollheim authors – most notably Ursula K. Le Guin – immediately transferred their allegiance to the new line, and Brunner followed suit in the unapologetically dystopian *The Jagged Orbit*. His less ambitious novels – which were now tending, as if by compensation, towards slapstick comedy – continued to appear from a number of different US publishers, including Ballantine (*Double, Double*, 1969) and Dell (*Timescoop*, 1969), while a number of works which had

composite – and so he was, for a while.

The alarmist themes of *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Jagged Orbit* were carried forward in *The Sheep Look Up*, whose main focus is upon the effects of environmental pollution, and *The Shockwave Rider*, which borrowed its main inspiration from Alvin Toffler's best-selling analysis of the effects of rapid technological change, *Future Shock* (1970). It was in *The Shockwave Rider* that the legacy of *Stand on Zanzibar* became most effective, allowing Brunner's anticipation of the likely effects of the computer revolution to take aboard social consequences that few other sf writers had glimpsed, including the advent of hobbyist terrorism and the impact of computer viruses. The book became one of the most significant precursors of cyberpunk fiction.

Brunner felt that these works were important, and critical opinion mostly sided with him. The publishing lines within which they were issued did not, however, live up to the hopes invested in them by their publishers. In spite of the repackaging efforts of Ballantine and Ace in the US and Penguin in the UK the new, more sophisticated sf failed to find a wider audience and many of its products lost the allegiance of a significant fraction of the audience which had sustained the growth of paperback sf between 1958 and 1968. Most of the publishers who had rushed into sf scenting a boom were equally quick to discard it when the boom failed to materialize. There were a few big winners in the US, but even writers who were subsequently to disclose awesome best-selling potential – notably Philip K. Dick and Robert Silverberg – became embittered by the inconsistent and often casually contemptuous treatment they were getting from publishers. Brunner, who had always expected his own relentless professionalism to be reflected in the work of copy-editors and publicists, made no secret of the anguish he felt at the way he and his works were being treated.

By 1970 the publishing industry had already fallen victim to future shock, and by 1975 it was obvious that it had failed dismally to ride out the subsequent shockwaves. This was not at all surprising; it was (and is) not unusual for three years to elapse between the signing of a contract and the publication of a book, and editors in a rapidly-changing world began to find, as a matter of routine, that market conditions altered dramatically during that interval. Books commissioned during periods of wild optimism were regularly overtaken by events such as the complete overhaul of the editorial staff, the axing of



not previously appeared in the UK were being issued by Penguin.

When *Stand on Zanzibar* won a Hugo at the 1969 Worldcon Brunner must have felt that his reputation was made and his future secured. We know this because his 1970 article on sf economics is far more optimistic than the first, recording that in year 15 of his career Theokurt Frishblitz, even without a Hugo to his name, was doing very well indeed, earning slightly less than an ex-colleague at his old advertising agency but having ample compensation for the narrow margin in his relaxed lifestyle. In a footnote to the article Brunner smugly observed that he was doing even better than his hypothetical

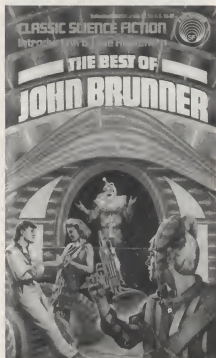
entire programmes and the takeover of the entire operation by a rival or an industrial conglomerate. Brunner suffered an unusually extreme misfortune of this kind when he contracted with Ballantine – which had recently been taken over by Random House – to write a massive historical novel about Mississippi steamboats, which was intended to be his breakthrough to mainstream bestsellerdom.

While researching this novel Brunner suffered bad health problems, which delayed it long beyond the envisaged deadline. Between 1975 and 1980 he published no novels at all; in 1980 two modest sf novels appeared, and then nothing more until *The Great Steamboat Race* finally appeared in print in 1983. By that time, however, Random House's extravagant hopes for the development of Ballantine had long been dashed on the rocks of a stormy marketplace and the unpromoted book slipped away unnoticed, its fate an embarrassment to all concerned.

Ballantine's sf list, which had become Del Rey Books in 1977, had by this time retreated downmarket and was in the process of replacing Don Wollheim's DAW – which moved almost entirely into the fantasy field when Don fell ill and his daughter Betsy assumed control of editorial policy – as the last bastion of pulp-descended space opera. Del Rey continued to issue Brunner's sf novels, including his ambitious episodic history of an alien world, *The Crucible of Time* (1983), as well as more typical produce like *A Maze of Stars* (1991), but the impetus of his career had been utterly lost.

In the 1980s computerized stock-control began to keep an increasingly close and detailed watch on the movement of books through US chain-stores like Waldenbooks and B. Dalton's and any writer whose sales figures were on a downward trajectory was effectively doomed, because orders for each successive book would be cut to the sales of the last, resulting in even fewer sales. Writers capable of formularizing their output to the evident patterns of reader demand and willing to work for minimal advances could get by in such a marketplace, but in spite of his productivity Brunner had never been a formulaistic writer. That was one of the most remarkable things about him: even writing at speed, employing plots which were essentially routine (and even his very best work tended to be routine in plotting terms) there was always something in his works which gave them an extra spark of interest. His fascination with the ideas he was importing into his work maintained their novelty and their individuality.

Several works which Brunner had initially drafted with modest aspirations revealed far greater scope when he went back to them, so that the novelettes aggregated into the alternative-history series *Times Without Number* (1962) warranted careful revision in 1969 into a very good novel, while the strange allegorical fantasy "Imprint of Chaos" (1960) became the seed of the highly distinctive *Traveller in Black* (1971, expanded 1986). It is true that promising ideas like those which were the bases of *To Conquer Chaos* (1964) and *Total Eclipse* (1974) suffered somewhat from rather cursory treatment that never was properly repaired, but they nevertheless avoided the kind of button-pushing stereotypy which annihilates all vestiges of intellectual interest within the kind of futuristic costume-drama which dominates mass-market sf. It is for this reason that much of Brun-



ner's early work remains readable today; even in a marketplace hostile to reprints it continues to resurface in such volumes as the Arrow omnibus *Victims of the Nova* (1989).

The work which Brunner did in the late 1980s and early 1990s recapitulates old themes in a more prolix fashion that is not always to its advantage, but *A Maze of Stars* is a fluent modern space opera which retains the seedy glamour of the galactic empire and is far subtler in matters of ideology than the bulk of the militaristic American sf which carries forward the same tradition, and *Children of the Thunder* (1989) scrupulously avoids easy answers in combining the kind of theme Brunner first addressed in *The Dreaming*

*Earth* with more sophisticated dystopian imagery. By this time he was having great difficulty selling his work and its failure to earn out the moderate advances he was now receiving must have wounded him deeply. Had he sat down to write a new article on the economics of sf writing for *Vector* one suspects that it would have found Theodore Frishblitz in a state of deep disappointment, struggling to cope with fewer resources and far less reason for hope than either of his younger selves.

Brunner's last published novel was *Muddle Earth* (1993), a satire in which 24th-century Earth has become a huge theme park managed by aliens. It is tempting to see it as a straightforward reflection of the fate of the sf field, although it is a good deal funnier and a great deal more laid-back than Brunner's analyses of the actual state of the market and his own personal plight. In a number of articles written for periodicals, including the *New Scientist*, he admitted that the accuracy of some of the futurological speculations contained in *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Shockwave Rider* had merely been a matter of recognizing the obvious in a day when the majority had been intent on ignoring it. This observation was, however, weighed against the consciousness that the majority had been the victors in the struggle, and that there was now no market at all for near-future extrapolation or for the kinds of technical experiment that had shaped and illuminated his most famous works.

Although he made a reasonably good recovery from the health problems which assailed him in the early 1970s Brunner was never as strong in body or in spirit as he had been in the late 1960s, and although he was still a month short of his 61st birthday when he suffered his fatal stroke the sad news of his demise was not a total surprise. I caught only the briefest glimpse of him on the day before he died, on the threshold of the dealers' room. I was not near enough to judge his reaction to what he saw there, but I know that he had been a regular attender of such affairs in the days when convention dealers' rooms contained nothing but bookstalls; it must surely have filled him with dismay to realize how hard it was to spot the few fugitive booksellers lurking in the corners of that vast space packed with film and TV merchandise, jewellery, model dragons, games, two-headed teddy-bears and computer accessories. The shape of things to come must have been perfectly obvious to him, as it was (and is) to anyone not intent on ignoring it.

**Brian Stableford**



REVIEWED

He is four foot nine inches high, hunch-backed and brittle-boned; he is also far too intelligent and honourable for his own good. He is an hereditary aristocrat from an imperial planet just emerging from feudalism into a interstellar society held together by a wormhole-nexus. He is an officer in imperial intelligence. In his spare time he is the leader of a fleet of spacefaring mercenaries. He also is the hero (along with his mother) of a string of highly successful novels by Lois McMaster Bujold.

If you haven't already guessed that I'm talking about Miles Naismith Vorkosigan then odds are you're British rather than American (or at least based on this side of the Atlantic). Bujold's books have made relatively little impact over here, while in the States she has become a runaway success for her publishers, Baen, and a firm favourite with fans. She has also picked up a clutch of awards – two Nebulas and four of the fan-based Hugos. Clearly, she's delivering the sort of sf book that a large number of American sf readers are looking for.

I have rock-solid evidence for her appeal over here too. My brother Nick is a longtime sf reader who doesn't think much of the writers and titles that have dominated the sf sections these last few years – mostly he's found them turgid. After having given him book after highly-rated book for Christmas, none of which stirred his enthusiasm, I handed him the first Vorkosigan book, *The Warrior's Apprentice*. It turned out to be the single most successful present I've ever given him. He's read it at least six times and he reports that it gets even better on rereading. It's the only book (out of dozens) to have produced the Oliver Twist response: "Any more by her?" He's loved every Bujold book I've sent him and rereads them with increasing pleasure too. Now, each time he gets a new one, it's an excuse for him to read his way through the entire series again.

I doubt Nick is the only sf reader in the UK looking for books like Bujold's: accessible "old-fashioned" sf, action-oriented but humane, idealistic without being preachy, and with a strong plotline that encompasses characters that you come to care about – in short, what is often wearily dismissed as just "a good read." So it's puzzling that she's barely risen above the waterline here. How much have the low-key marketing efforts of first Headline and now Pan had to do with it? Nick lives in Dorset – and says he can only ever remember seeing one of her titles in any of the local bookshops. And he's been hunting for them.

The most recent Vorkosigan book published in the UK was *Mirror Dance* (Pan, 26.99), which won a Hugo last year. It is easily Bujold's most ambitious work

## Miles Ahead

### Neil Jones

to date, focusing on Miles's clone-twin, Mark, introduced earlier in the series. Borrowing one of Miles's identities and a section of his mercenary fleet, Mark launches an ill-advised raid on the hi-tech bad-guy world of Jackson's Whole, the same world that cloned him to be used as a weapon against his brother. Miles, arriving to save the day, is first (temporarily) killed and then mislaid. As the search for Miles drags on, Mark finds himself inducted into the Vor nobility of the Barraryan Empire and also, more disturbingly, into Miles's family. Ultimately the theme of the story is the

search for identity and it's handled impressively, but Bujold doesn't neglect the action-adventure side and keeps her story gripping right up to a particularly strong and satisfying climax. There are certainly books around with more mind-bending ideas and flashier writing styles, but Bujold's work has evidently struck a chord with the Hugo-voters. The one for *Mirror Dance* is her fourth.

Her latest book, out in the US from Baen (\$21), is *Cetaganda*. Those familiar with the stories will at once identify the Cetagandan Empire as one of Miles's recurring foes, an interstellar bad-guy of formidable proportions, expansionist and aggressive, and the most serious threat to the new galactic power of Barraryan. It encompasses eight worlds (I assumed eight colony worlds plus a homeworld from the logic of the plot but this is irritatingly unclear from the text), dominates many other adjacent worlds, and is actively expansionist – it has previously fought two wars with Barraryan, and occupied it for a generation before being bloodily dislodged.

Diplomatic duty brings Miles and his cousin Ivan to the Cetagandan homeworld for the funeral of the Cetagandan Emperor's mother. From the outset, Miles finds himself improbably but entertainingly

up to his neck in a plot involving murder, Cetagandan politics and interstellar stability. As he seeks to identify the perpetrators before events close over his head, he experiences Cetagandan society at various levels, the target of an attack, and falls (hopelessly) in love.

In recent interviews, Bujold has said that her Vorkosigan books have been written as they came, with no overarching plan of events to come. Reading her books, though, gives quite a different impression. *Cetaganda* returns to an early stage of Miles's career (relatively – so far the series takes him from his parents' first meeting to the grand old age of 28, and here he's a mere stripling of 22), so it's had to be shoved in between the joins, as *Barraryan* was. Like that book, it fits in seamlessly.

Also impressive is the extra depth Bujold has brought to the Cetagandans. In the earlier books they were standard sinister villains; now, adding to that earlier impression rather than contradicting it, we find they are a lot more into D-I-Y human evolution than Barraryan or most other neighbouring states – while not having given up their enthusiasm for that venerable human hobby, power-grabbing.

After the ambitious *Mirror Dance*, with its rite of passage for Mark and harrowing consequences for Miles, *Cetaganda* is a much lighter story, almost a jaunt, dessert following main course. New readers, this is not the first of her books you should try – but those that are already hooked will find this a very satisfactory instalment in the life and eventful times of Miles Naismith Vorkosigan.

For Bujold completists only, there's also a collection of short stories and essays, *Dreamweaver's Dilemma* (NESFA Press, trade \$19.95, slipcased \$30), edited by Suford Lewis. This 1996 Boskone Guest-of-Honour book contains three previously uncollected stories and another two from the bottom drawer: a Sherlock Holmes tale (with the last couple of pages missing!) which shows us where Miles's runaway intelligence must have come from; and "Dreamweaver's Dilemma," the first (and earliest) story in Bujold's future history. There's a sixth and final story: the familiar "The Mountains of Mourning," which won both Hugo and Nebula. Plus there's a Vor genealogy, a pronunciation guide, and a reprint of the Miles chronology (slightly upgraded from the version in the latest novel).

But what make this book worth having are the interview and Bujold's essays. Readable and intelligent, they illuminate such things as her pre-publication struggles, her writing methodology, and the genesis of her various stories. And I'm sure many current writers of sf would benefit from her sensible – but doubtless controversial – views on readability and style. I know my brother Nick would agree with them 100%.

Neil Jones





REVIEWED

The blurb to R. W. F. Poole's *The Hounds of Heaven* (Nyal Press, £14.50), announces that it "is not politically correct and contains scenes of sex, violence and hunting," which the reader can regard as a sportsman's warning or a blatant come-on according to taste. It is not, in itself, a difficult promise to keep, and I suppose that an early scene featuring the understandable distress of a new widow whose husband's genitals have been hacked off and stuffed down his throat (the milieu being Bosnia, and recent) fulfils it.

Obviously it's a faithful pastiche of the 1930s thriller, where (in Ian Fleming's words) the villains are blacker than black, the heroes are whiter than white, and the heroines all a delicate shade of pink. As such it's pugnaciously traditional in tone, and updated only in the light of what is no longer considered too obscene to print. The result is rather as if John Buchan had been revised by Simon Raven, with a little help from Lord Dunsany for the hunting scenes. That may be a specialized taste (though I doubt that the author will be too unhappy with such a description) but I scent a subtext. The intention of this book is, I think, less to tell a story or explore character than to present a lifestyle – and to present it in-er-face, knowing well that it's one which many sections of society would gladly see buried.

The lifestyle is that of Lord Frederick FitzHugh, younger son of a marquis, major in the Blues and Royals, heavily into field-sports, rich enough to be on familiar terms with the waiters at the Savoy and very much aware of his feudal obligations (which sit slightly enough, as they follow his natural bent). I see certain lips curling at the thought of such privilege, and Poole offers them plenty of detail, especially in the hunting scenes. Curiously, he describes no encounters with hunt saboteurs, which must count as a wasted opportunity *pour épater les bien-pensants* yet further. Nonetheless, I hear the same lips mutter "Serve him right!" when Fred loses almost all his money through injudicious choice of syndicate at Lloyds.

The loss does nothing to prevent him from acquiring a beautiful and fiery girlfriend called Katerina, but she has obligations of her own, principally towards her cousin Tatiana Czerny, the lady whose husband was so ill-treated. Nor is she alone in that, for the ever-turning gyres have brought back the time of the Wolf, and with the Wolf comes the Wolf's arch enemy, Odin (or Wotan, as he is known in those parts). Wotan is by no means all-powerful; indeed, he looks and behaves more like Hern the Hunter, but he retains some preternatural powers and the Czerny estates are on his patch. While the family runs them honourably (i.e., according to their feudal obligations), he takes a paternal interest.

Tales where gods dabble in the affairs of mankind are tricky; Poole negotiates that difficulty well enough by paring Wotan down almost to the stature of Weyland as conceived by Kipling, but he's less good at human sexuality. Fred's affair

with Katerina fades out, and various adventures (plus some discreet prodding from Wotan) lead him and his foxhounds to Slovenia, Tatiana and battle with the ultimate wolf, but neither he nor anyone else shows much finesse on the way. This is fine for recounting the sexual humiliation of sundry unpleasant characters, but decorum is less well served when alleged romantic lovers rut with all the delicacy of two powerful steam locomotives colliding in an ill-lit tunnel.

And after something so unabashedly macho, another small press (Five Leaves Publications) brings *Water* by Sue Thomas (£7.99), which is just as much a woman's book.

Ruth is a university lecturer bringing up her daughter, Julie, alone, Simon having left her for another woman. The story charts the effect of Julie's adolescence on both of them in terms of the book's rather insistent symbol of water in all its aspects, which Thomas reinforces by inserting sundry snippets of aquatic information at more-or-less relevant points; in consequence whereof my mind is now enriched with knowledge of drowning and its avoidance, some obscure piscine foibles and an interesting Chinese myth. Ruth loves water, swims well and (since an unfortunate affair with a *chef de poissons*), can't bear to eat fish; Julie fears it, and enjoys every aspect of a seaside holiday (including the fish 'n' chips) except the beach. For both of them Simon's absence is like a positive and destructive presence; Ruth needs a man and Julie needs a father, but they're both intelligent enough to see that Ruth's short-lived and loveless affairs offer no real substitute for either.

The novel is a psychological portrait of two women, and the male characters are a sorry bunch, perfunctorily described. This seems less from bitterness than lack of interest, and is not a serious flaw; it's a book for and about women and their desires. The fantasy element enters when Ruth takes as lover Rauri, a water-elemental. It's marginal fantasy, since no one else can see Rauri and the author leaves open the question of his existence; the actions

attributed to him could have been performed by Ruth in fugue, and even the brief passages written from Rauri's viewpoint can legitimately be ascribed to Ruth's imagination. But whether you read it in terms of the will to call spirits from the vasty deep or the curative effects of a psychotic episode, it's carefully constructed, elegantly written and (on the second interpretation) raises an interesting psychological question: Just how bad is it to go off your trolley for a while?

There are several ways of playing a vampire tale straight, but if they're played for laughs the jokes are likely to be earthy – vide Anne Billson's *Suchers*. Christopher Moore's *Bloodsucking Fiends: A Love Story* (Black Swan, £6.99) combines traditional horror with the comedy of Californian manners as perceived by Tommy, a naive 19-year-old from the Midwest, and Jody, a 26-year-old native whose fortune it is to become a fledgling vampire in the first chapter. As she is looking for a daytime amanuensis, and he for romance, inspiration and somewhere decent to lay his head, all should be merry as a wedding bell, save that the relationship has a third, unseen member – the male vampire who turned Jody, purely to see how she would cope.

It's a good mix of ingredients, and Moore handles it with gusto and panache. The motives of the older vampire don't really need to be explained; he's bored, and it amuses him to watch this ill-matched couple flounder and occasionally play a trick on them – one of which may sooner or later prove lethal. The suspense inherent in this provides a framework for the main business of the book, which is a series of jokes about love, sex, literary ambitions, California, etc. But though the targets are easy many of the jokes are ingenious, especially the ones about what goes on during the graveyard shift at Safeways, where Tommy gets a job as night supervisor. I don't want to give too much away, but the new and original form of ten-pin bowling is especially good, and so is the running gag about the mismatch between Tommy's ingrained respectable blue-collar politeness and his self-image as a hell-raiser in the style of Kerouac.

For that matter, so are the cod extracts from a women's magazine self-assessment quiz and the gay cosmetics-salesman's diatribe about the personality of the Winter Woman. Neither is exactly new, but neither has ever been done better – Moore has an extremely fine ear as well as a telling eye for detail, and it all makes for a very superior entertainment.

And the story? Moore brings it to a slightly rushed but very satisfactory conclusion, then winds it down with a couple of last-minute surprises in the final pages, elegantly tying off the final loose ends. Incidentally, in *Interzone* 104 I mentioned an ongoing weakness of just about all vampire tales, serious and comic. Moore has thought of a way round that as well. Excellent!

Chris Gilmore

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages.

A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alderman, Gill. **The Memory Palace**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649773-X, 433pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a third novel by this Irish-resident British author, whose previous books were planetary-romance sf; this one looks like an interesting "literary fantasy.") 4th March 1996.

Ashley, Mike, and William G. Contento. **The Supernatural Index: A Listing of Fantasy, Supernatural, Occult, Weird, and Horror Anthologies**. "Bibliographies and Indexes in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror, Number 5." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-24030-2, xiii+933pp, hardcover, £156. (Vast index to most horror and ghost-story anthologies published since the early 19th century; first published in the USA, 1995; with its nearly 1,000 double-columned, small-printed pages, it contains a wealth of information and is the result of more than 20 years' work [on and off] on Ashley's part; highly recommended; this is the American first edition with a British price; it's distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St, London WC2E 8LU.) Late entry: June 1995 publication, received in February 1996.

Asimov, Isaac. **Magic: The Final Fantasy Collection**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224622-8, viii+275pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy and non-fiction collection, first published in the USA, 1996; Asimov's last book? — but we asked that question last time, when *Gald* came out in 1995; half of this new volume consists of previously uncollected fiction from the late 1980s and early 1990s; the other half consists of brief essays, mostly Asimov's *SF Magazine* editorials from the 1980s, on the subject of fantasy writing and fantasy themes.) 4th March 1996.

Baskin, Ellen. **Serials on British Television, 1950-**

1994. Scolar Press, ISBN 1-85928-015-3, xiii+332pp, hardcover, £45. (Copiously annotated chronological guide to all serials made for British TV, both "classic serials" based on novels and originals written for the small screen; first edition; a splendid reference work, it's thoroughly indexed by title, genre, author [in the case of adaptations], scriptwriter, producer, director and leading actors; although it states "1994" in the sub-title, it in fact covers everything through the first quarter of 1995; all sf and fantasy serials are listed here, with the exception of series consisting of "cycles of serials" such as *Doctor Who*; considering that there have been hundreds of books about the cinema, and dozens of books about trivial TV series such as *The Avengers*, it's amazing that no one has thought to do a book on TV serials before now — a major cultural form of the past 45 years; at last it has been done, and done well; very highly recommended.) 21st March 1996.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. **Lady of the Trillium**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649660-1, 315pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the copyright is shared with Elizabeth Waters, and the "Acknowledgements" suggests that the latter wrote much of the book.) 4th March 1996.

Brin, David. **The Uplift War**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-371-9, 638pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1987; Hugo Award-winner.) 7th March 1996.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **Dreamweaver's Dilemma: Short Stories and Essays**. Edited by Suford Lewis. Introduction by Lillian Stewart Carl. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-66-8, xiv+250pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$19.95. (SF collection, first edition; it contains two previously unpublished novellas, "Dreamweaver's Dilemma" and "The Adventure of the Lady on the Embankment" [the latter is a Sherlock Holmes pastiche], plus four reprinted



short stories, various articles, an interview, a bibliography and other matter; there is a simultaneous signed, slipcased edition [not seen].) Late entry: 1995 publication, received in February 1996.

Caldar, Richard. **Dead Girls**. St Martin's Paperbacks, ISBN 0-312-95717-3, 206pp, A-format paperback, \$4.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1993 [not "1992" as it states inside]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 75; this is the first mass-market paperback we've seen from St Martin's Press; it carries a "teaser" extract from Calder's second novel, *Dead Boys*, on pages 207-218.) February 1996.

Caveny, Philip. **Burn Down Easy**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1597-9, 314pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; we were last sent a novel by this author, *Black Wolf*, in 1993; since then he has published several more which were not sent for review: *Strip Jack Naked*, *Slayground* and *Skin Flicks*; presumably they belong more to the crime field than the horror field.) 14th March 1996.

Cherry, C. J. **Invader**. "The stunning sequel to *Foreigner*." Legend, ISBN 0-09-944421-6, 426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £5.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 103.) Late entry: 18th January publication, received in February 1996.

Christian, Deborah. **Mainline**. "A Science Fiction Thriller." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86029-3, 383pp, hardcover, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$23.95. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; the central notion, of a professional hit-person who can shift between alternative worlds, sounds rather reminiscent of that in Greg Egan's short story "The Infinite Assassin"; this is a debut novel by a new American writer who is described as being "a veteran of the U.S. Army" and the former "manager of information systems at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory"; Stephen Donaldson, Larry Niven and others commend it on the cover; there's also a commendation from Nicola Griffith, who

says: "It really does make a refreshing change to read about a woman who kills people for a living instead of worrying about their well-being.") June 1996.

Denton, Bradley. **Lunatics**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-14363-X, 325pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "a rollicking romantic fantasy.") June 1996.

Di Filippo, Paul. **Ribofunk**. Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., Room 503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-062-2, 295pp, hardcover, \$20. (SF collection, first edition; proof copy received; the author's second book, it's a collection of 13 loosely-affiliated stories about a hi-biotech future; two of them, "Distributed Mind" and "Big Eater," first appeared in *Interzone*; two other pieces, "The Bad Splice" and "Blankie" are original to the book; the others appeared in *F&SF*, *SF Age*, the anthology series *New Worlds and Universe*, and elsewhere.) April 1996.

Donnelly, Joe. **Havock Junction**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-952701-4, 464pp, A-format paperback, cover by Nicholas Forder, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1995.) Late entry: 4th January publication, received in February 1996.

Flynn, Michael F. **Firestar**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85525-7, 575pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a big book — long pages, small print, weighs a ton — and it's billed as "launching a multi-volume epic of our future on Earth and in space"; it seems to be a saga of private enterprise to the stars, in the tradition of Heinlein's *The Man Who Sold the Moon* [except that in this case the author is "progressive" enough to make his billionaire benefactor a woman]; Michael Flynn [born 1947] is known as an *Analog* magazine writer and for his collaboration with Niven & Pournelle on the novel *Fallen Angels*.) May 1996.

Haining, Peter, ed. **The Wizards of Odd: Comic Tales of Fantasy**. Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63308-2, 300pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £15.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; this interesting selection of reprints mixes well-known stories with the obscure [and includes some sf]; authors include Douglas

Adams, Brian Aldiss, F. Anstey, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Fredric Brown, James Branch Cabell, Arthur C. Clarke, John Collier, Avram Davidson, Philip K. Dick, Lord Dunsany, Henry Kuttner, Ursula Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, C. S. Lewis, Larry Niven, Terry Pratchett [natch; his story, though very brief, is given pride of place], Eric Frank Russell, Kurt Vonnegut and H. G. Wells [the last-named is represented with a piece called "The Wild Asses of the Devil"; where on earth did Haining dredge that up from? — it's a pity he doesn't explain its provenance.] 21st March 1996.

Harman, Andrew. **The Scrying Game**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-970311-4, 296pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous A-format paperback edition, priced at £4.99.) 1st February 1996.

Hill, Douglas. **Galaxy's Edge**. "Cade 1". Bantam, ISBN 0-553-05334-0, 190pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £3.50. (Young-adult sf novel; first edition; the opener in a new space-opera trilogy which seems to be harking back to the style of Hill's "Last Legionary" books of 15 years ago.) 3rd March 1996.

Hodgson, William Hope. **The House on the Borderland**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0282-6, 186pp, A-format paperback, £4.95. (Horror/sf novel, first published in the UK, 1908 [not "1983" as it states inside]; this is probably an abridged version, since *The Encyclopedia of SF* states "recent paperback edns cut" and there's nothing to indicate that this one, which presumably is a straight reprint of a 1983 issue, contains restored text.) March 1996.

Holt, Tom. **My Hero**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-365-4, 314pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 2nd May 1996.

Kandel, Michael. **Panda Ray**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-14387-7, 219pp, hardcover, £20.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author is best known as a translator of Stanislaw Lem's books.) July 1996.

Kilpatrick, Nancy. **Child of the Night**. Raven, ISBN 1-85487-446-2, 314pp, B-format

paperback, cover by Pete Rozycki, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; proof copy received; the author lives in Canada; it seems to be obligatory for all the newer female North American horror writers to be called Nancy — Nancy Baker, Nancy Collins, Nancy Holder... none of them, of course, to be confused with Nancy Kress, eminent sf person.) 20th May 1996.

[Marnock, Craig, ed.] **Shipbuilding: New SF from Scotland**. Taverna Press [c/o Glasgow SF Writers Circle, 3/3, 325 North Woodside Rd., Glasgow — no postcode shown], no ISBN, 156pp, small-press paperback, no price [but presumably the publishers would appreciate payment for postage and packing; they don't say, but £1 should cover it]. (Sf anthology, first edition; sponsored by Glasgow City Council and John Smith Bookshops, this was a give-away at the World SF Convention in August 1995 [but, alas, we were not given one at the time]; it consists of an unsigned two-page introduction [probably by Craig Marnock, though the editorship of the book is not made clear] and 11 stories by Scottish-resident authors, three of them reprinted from *Interzone* — Fergus Bannion's "Burning Brightly" [we removed the "ly" from his title: why mangle a quote from Blake?], Michael Cobley's "Corrosion" and Gary M. Gibson's "Touched by an Angel"; of the remaining authors, who range from Paul F. Cockburn and Veronica Colin to Andrew J. Wilson and Neil Williamson, only one is known as a novelist — Angus McAllister.) Late entry: January 1995 publication, received in February 1996.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Death of Chaos**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-369-7, 551pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the fifth "Recluce" novel.) 14th March 1996.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Fall of Angels**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85905-8, 447pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the sixth "Re-



cluce" novel; in an accompanying publicity letter, David Hartwell describes this series as "rational fantasy" with an "sf attitude.") June 1996.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Order War**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-377-8, 581pp, A-format

paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the fourth "Recluce" novel.) 14th March 1996.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Remnant Population**. Baen, ISBN 0-671-87718-6, 342pp, hardcover, £22. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) May 1996.

Powaga, Wiesiek, ed. **The Dedalus Book of Polish Fantasy**. Translated by the editor, Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-90-9, 371pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jacek Malczewski, £9.99. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains stories by Witold Gombrowicz, Stefan Grabinski, Slawomir Mrozek, Wladyslaw Reymont, Bruno Schulz and other Polish authors of repute who are perhaps less well known in the west; neither of the Grabinski stories here, "The Grey Room" and "The Black Hamlet," was included in his collection *The Dark Domain*, issued by Dedalus in 1993, which is nice to know; the youngest author included, Jacek Dukaj, was born in 1974, and his story "The Golden Galaxy" was published when he was just 15.) 7th March 1996.

Pratchett, Terry. **Feet of Clay**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05900-1, 288pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest "Discworld" novel.) 6th June 1996.

Preuss, Paul. **Core**. "The electrifying techno-thriller." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21119-5, 394pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Corley, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 4th March 1996.

Prill, David. **Serial Killer Days**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-14411-3, 218pp, hardcover, £20.95. (Humorous horror/suspense novel, first edition; proof copy received; a

second novel by this American author whose first, *The Unnatural*, gained praise last year; what Douglas Adams did for sf, what Terry Pratchett did for heroic fantasy, this guy seems to be trying to do for the Stephen King/Dean Koonz-type shocker.) June 1996.

Sheffield, Charles, and Jerry Pournelle. **Higher Education: A Jupiter Book**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86174-5, 286pp, hardcover, £21.95. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is the first of a hi-tech, spacefaring series, to be written by various hands in deliberate emulation of Robert A. Heinlein's 1950s "juveniles"; they are to be "upbeat, optimistic, and scientifically accurate," says the accompanying publicity letter from editor Greg Cox; which is all very commendable; this novel has a dreadful title, though, even if it's meant ironically — a title which surely wouldn't be marketable in Britain [or, at any rate, in England] where most young people, even the clever ones, seem to hate the whole idea of education [alas.] June 1996.

Shwartz, Susan. **Shards of Empire**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85716-0, 382pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; not to be confused with *Shards of Space* by Shekley or *Shards of Honor* by Bujold; even Brian Aldiss once wrote a short story called "Shards"; it may be good Old English [meaning "fragments"], but why this genre obsession with the word "shards"? — no one else, out there in the real world, ever seems to use it [where it's more often rendered "sherds," as in archaeologists' "pot-sherds," but tends not to occur in book titles]; talking of the real world, when she ain't writing fantasy novels, Ms Shwartz is a high-powered, Wall Street wheeler-dealer — not many people know that!) April 1996.

Silverberg, Robert. **Starborne**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10264-8, 291pp, hardcover, £22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 13th May 1996.

Thornley, Diann. **Echoes of Issel**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86087-0, 349pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel in the "saga of the Unified

Worlds" military sf series, following the author's debut title *Ganwald's Child*.) April 1996.

Tubb, E. C. **Pandora's Box: A Science Fiction Thriller.** Introduction by Philip Harbottle. Gryphon Publications [PO Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, USA], ISBN 0-936071-55-9, 105pp, small-press paperback [with dustjacket], cover by Ron Turner, \$15 [plus \$2 postage and packing]. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed, limited hardcover edition [not seen]; this short novel was written in 1954 for one of the UK "mushroom" paperback publishers but went unpublished at the time; Gary Lovisi of Gryphon Publications has sent a note stating that he has also published another "lost" Tubb novel, *Temple of Death*, along with this one – but he has not sent us a review copy.) Late entry: 30th January publication, received in February 1996.

Veevers, Marian. **Bloodlines.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06196-0, 270pp, hardcover, cover by Dan Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new British writer who is a part-time sub-postmistress in Cumbria.) 6th June 1996.

Walker, Sage. **Whiteout.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85765-9, 352pp,

hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new American writer, it seems to be yet another example of female cyberpunk – a sub-type of sf which is becoming quite fashionable in the

1990s [so much for those critics who a few years ago were writing articles about the essentially male, sexist nature of cyberpunk!]; Gardner Dozois and Walter Jon Williams commend it on the cover, with the usual array of adjectives applied to this kind of thing – "tough," "sexy," "smart" and, of course, "stylish"; with the perspective of 10 or 12 years now, there can be no doubt that cyberpunk, long since pronounced "dead" by wishful trend-haters, has given American sf an immense shot in the arm, allowing it to resume its social-critical mission of the 1950s in new guise; "Earth, 20 minutes into the future," says the blurb on this novel, "a place where government means multinational corporations and where overpopulation, poverty and hunger are the norm for most of the planet" and "the hottest new industry is Media Manipulation";



yea – right on!; come back, John Brunner, all is forgiven...) April 1996.

Welford, Sue. **Siren Song.** Point SF, ISBN 0-590-13386-1, 192pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £3.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition.) February

1996.

Wilder, Cherry. **Signs of Life.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86171-0, 349pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Wilder's first new full-length sf work in a number of years, it's set on the same planet as her 1982 novel *Second Nature*.) May 1996.

Wilhelm, Kate. **Malice Prepense.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-14364-8, 412pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Crime novel by a major sf writer, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Death Qualified* and *The Best Defense* in the "Barbara Holloway" legal-mystery series.) July 1996.

Williams, Michael. **Arcady.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45500-2, viii+400pp, trade paperback, cover by Romas Kukalis, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this seems to be a

"breakthrough" book for an author previously known for his TSR games-related fantasy novels [he is also a poet, having written most of the pretty little verses which embellish Weis & Hickman's "DragonLance" books]; it has been sent to us by the British publishers Hodder & Stoughton, who are planning to issue a UK hardcover edition, priced at £16.99, on 18th July 1996.) April 1996.

Zelazny, Roger, ed. **The Williamson Effect.** Introduction by David Brin. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85748-9, 347pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; all-new stories in honour of Jack Williamson by Paul Anderson, Ben Bova, John Brunner, Jane Lindskold [Zelazny's companion of his later years, who completed the editorial work on this volume], Andre Norton, Frederik Pohl, Mike Resnick, Fred Saberhagen, Connie Willis and others; happily, Williamson [born 1908] is still alive and writing, but it's sadly ironic that the editor of this *festschrift* [born 1937] should have died last summer – likewise one of its leading contributors, John Brunner, who was nearer Zelazny's age than Williamson's.) May 1996.

## Spinoffery

*This is a list of all books received that fall into these sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.*

Anderson, Kevin J., ed. **War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10353-9, xi+274pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Shared-world of anthology, spun off from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*; first edition; proof copy received; contributors include Gregory Benford & David Brin [writing in collaboration], George Alec Effinger, Barbara Hambly, Mike Resnick, Robert Silverberg, Allen Steele, Don Webb, Walter Jon Williams and Connie Willis, among others; all the stories are original [apart from Howard Waldrop's "Night of the Cooters," first published in 1987], and consist of perspectives on the Martian invasion as seen by various famous folk, ranging from President Teddy Roosevelt to Jules Verne, by way of Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, Henry James, Mark Twain and others less expected; in Britain, this kind of book is not permitted, thanks to the copyright laws [see Patrick Parrinder's

relevant article in *Interzone* 104] – unless Bantam UK will choose to challenge the Wells estate on its home turf!) 13th May 1996.

Bischoff, David. **Alien Island.** "Gerry Anderson's Space Precinct." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648232-5, 257pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA [?].) 4th March 1996.

Krulik, Theodore. **The Complete Amber Sourcebook.** "From Shadow to Chaos to the One True World – an indispensable guide to the history, hierarchy, and wonder of Roger Zelazny's Amber universe." AvonNova, ISBN 0-380-75409-

6, xv+494pp, trade paperback, cover by Glen Orbik, \$15. (Alphabetical guide to imaginary persons, places, things, languages, etc., in Zelazny's fantasy world; first edition; with its dense text and double-columned pages, this never-to-be-surely-impenetrable to the non-initiate – is rather reminiscent of Willis E. McNelly's *Frank Herbert* spinoff, *The Dune Encyclopedia* [1984].) Late entry: January publication, received in February 1996.

Mangels, Andy. **Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Characters.** "The only detailed, illustrated, comprehensive guide to the major and minor characters of the Star Wars universe!" Bantam, ISBN

0-7522-0109-3, xi+199pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Illustrated guide to imaginary persons and entities in the *Star Wars* sf movie series [and their spinoffs], created by George Lucas; first published in the USA, 1995.) 11th March 1996.

Mortimore, Jim. **Clark's Law.** "Babylon 5, Book #4." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0153-0, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski; unlike the authors of previous volumes in the series, the writer of this one is British; you can tell he is British because he says in his afterword/acknowledgments, "this novel was written on an Amstrad PCW 8512 [yahooh!! TWO disc drives!!]; how parochial can you get?; in fact, his name is also familiar from the covers of several "Doctor Who" novels published by Virgin.) 11th March 1996.

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**AC3: A SPACE EXPLORATION NOVEL** by Stanley Oliver, published USA (1992), rec. UK price £14. Recently available here. Hardback, 261 pages (16 by 23 cm). Journey to our nearest star system in year 2560. Bargain price £5.50 (post free). Orders/inquiries to author: 37 Ducky Avenue, Paignton, Devon TQ3 1ER.

**HARM'S WAY** — "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locusts*) — large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox and Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 2a Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, Middx. HA2 0DA.

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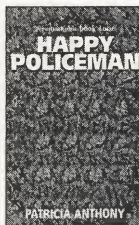
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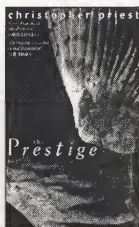
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